SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

# ARGOSY

APRIL, 1956

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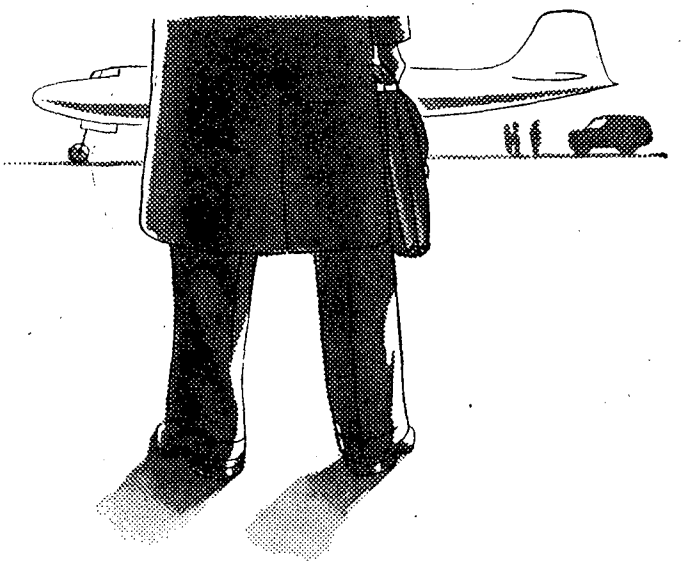

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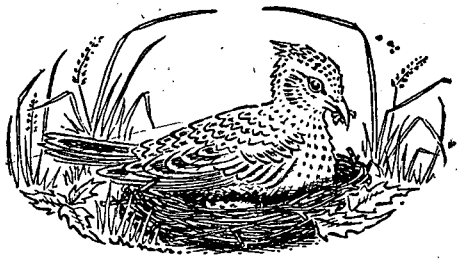
# *SINGER'S NEST*

*CROUCHED on the cliff-top wind-dwarfed sloe*
*And bristling gorse with golden bloom aglow*
*Shelter the nest, concealed in shallow turf,*
*While, soaring high*
*In the blue sky*
*The lark's song mingles with the sound of surf.*

*Gaily he sings, while in the nest,*
*In speckled shells, beneath his mate's warm breast,*
*Quicken to life their young, who, from the turf*
*One day will soar*
*To sing once more*
*The song he sings now with the singing surf.*

WILFRID GIBSON



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# EDGE OF FEAR

**The triumph in his smile was like a blow**

## by VICTOR CANNING

THE dusk of an early summer evening was closing in. The lights of the Champs Elysées were soft and a little hazy through the purple twilight. Over everything there was a gentle, leisurely atmosphere that seemed to have muted the noise of the traffic and slowed down the bustle of the crowds—a warm, idle Paris evening with the café tables filling up, the cinema signs glowing red and blue and green, and a faint breeze stirring the young leaves of the trees.

Sophie Nerval walked slowly up towards the Arc de Triomphe. In the mornings she was pressed for time and the walk to the newspaper office where she worked as a secretary was always a hurried one. There was so much to do before she left her flat—breakfast for herself and Raoul, then seeing Raoul off to school, and then the ten minutes' whip-around to tidy the place and make beds before she left—always a hurry. But in the evenings she could take her time.

In the flat off the place des Ternes, fifteen minutes away, Raoul would be back doing his homework, and happily waiting for her return and the supper they would share together. These fifteen minutes belonged to her alone, and in a life that had known unhappiness and still had hardships for a young widow with one child and a small salary, they held a leisurely contentment.

She was twenty-eight, and as she passed the cafés she knew that more than one man's eyes rested on her a little longer than they did on most women; the black suit that showed off a trim figure, the touch of white lace at the neck of her blouse, the small, thoughtful, attractive face, the tiny hat she had made herself—Sophie Nerval, walking home, unconcerned by the way men looked at her . . . thinking of Raoul.

She was near the top of the Champs Elysées when she became conscious that a man had been walking abreast of her on the wide pavement for a few seconds. He matched his steps with hers. Then, as she glanced across at him, he drew in close to her. A hand came out and held her by the arm, a light but firm grasp.

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"Sophie . . ." One word, full of a harsh, hungry affection. And hearing it, almost before she looked at his face, the pleasure of the evening shredded away, leaving her full of cold shock and the stir of quick fears.

She stopped and looked at him. Her lips were pressed tight together and she could feel her body taut against the misery of this moment.

"Go away," she said hoarsely. "Go away."

He shook his head and the grip on her arm tightened. Through that contact, she knew again the violence that was so much part of him, the destructive power that inhabited everything he did and thought.

"We must talk," he said, and then with a brief, dry laugh, added, "don't look so scared."

His hand still on her arm he walked up the pavement and they turned into a café and found a table in a corner by a row of boxed shrubs. She said nothing, knowing that this was no moment to break away from him, watching him as he ordered drinks for them; Dubonnet for her and Pernod for himself. Always it had been that in the old days.

He looked older, and more prosperous than she had ever known him; the cloth of his suit was dark and rich; he wore a white silk shirt and his wristwatch was expensive. There was a gold ring on his finger. She refused the cigarette he offered her from a silver case . . . in the old days he had carried a crumpled packet of Gauloises bleues in his pocket.

"You never believed that I was dead?" he asked heavily.

"No. They said you had been drowned, but I never believed it, even though I called myself a widow. What do you want?"

"You and the boy."

"No," she said sharply. "For me you are dead. And Raoul has forgotten you—has no memory of you."

"You and the boy. I am your husband and his father." He said it without raising his voice; low, flat-sounding words but with all his deep will behind them. And he smiled as though he knew that nothing could stop him having his way.

Once she had loved that smile. Now she hated it. Paul Nerval, a big man, full of strength, proud of his body, even vain about his heavy, deeply lined, handsome face. In the old days he had been clean-shaven, but now he wore a dark moustache. His black hair was touched with white above the ears. There was a healed scar, too, running diagonally from the left-hand corner of his mouth to his nose—that must have happened since he had been taken away.

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More calmly now, gathering her defences, Sophie said, "You are dead—officially. You cannot make any claim on Raoul or myself without the police knowing. And then—"

"They would put me back, eh?" He smiled and he swirled his ice in the yellowy-green Pernod. "But we will go away. Names can be changed and I have money. That is why I have come back to you—for that and one other thing." He stared beyond her at the road and at the bulk of the Arc de Triomphe dark against the purple-brown evening sky. Then his attention came back to her and his right hand clamped on hers suddenly. "You're not thinking of marrying again?"

"No."

"Why not?" The inquiry was underscored with a harsh note of jealousy.

"I could have been—if I could have believed you were really dead."

"It is good you aren't. I would have choked the life out of him—"

"Paul, why don't you go away? Leave me alone. Leave Raoul." It was the nearest she could come to entreaty, knowing as she spoke that nothing would move him from his course. "You don't need us. You have money. They think you are dead. To take us means danger for you. Go away and forget us."

He shook his head, the lines of his face deepening. "I need you both. You will come with me." He was inflexible.

Sophie said, "I have only to call the waiter to bring the police here. You would be finished."

Paul laughed. "Do that. Do it."

And she knew she couldn't.

Once there had been love between them, happiness . . . and he was Raoul's father. Anything she did now Raoul would know. He was no longer a child of three, unaware of the world of newspapers and gossip. And over all that was the memory of a dead love that still held its own loyalties.

"You can't," he said. "What I did in the past I did for you, to give you the things I wanted you to have. It failed, but no matter, I tried. Maurice died for you, and I spent four years in hell on that island for you, and for the last two years I have worked for you, waiting for this moment when I could come back and offer you a full life."

"I don't want your money or your love. Understand that, Paul. I want nothing from you!"

He waved her words aside, ignoring them, looking now into the future that he had planned, knowing his strength could take her with him, confident that the dead love in her would live

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again. He was a man. She was his woman and the child was his. These things held them, these and the violent sureness in him.

"The money is honest," he said. "I have a business in Marseilles. Everything in the past is dead, except my love. Understand that with me, Sophie, love and hatred never die. You and Maurice were the only people I ever loved. Tomorrow we shall go to Marseilles and begin again. You and Raoul—it will not be hard to make things right with him, and I shall be his father again. Come."

He threw a note on the table for the waiter and then, taking her arm, led her from the café.

Sophie went with him, feeling the burden of her helplessness inside her like a great weight. What could she do? He was calm and sure, and underneath she knew there was the cold violence which only too late in her marriage she had discovered, a violence which in frustration could break the things he loved as well as the things he hated.

If she refused him, he was capable of taking Raoul from her; any evening she might return to the flat to find Raoul gone. If she ran away with Raoul he would spend his life looking for them; and if she went to the police, the papers would have the story. Raoul would know exactly the kind of man his father had been: a thief who had never scrupled to use violence . . .

At the Arc de Triomphe she expected him to turn towards the place des Ternes. He would know where they lived, must have been watching her for days. But, hand on her arm, he steered her down the avenue Foch.

"Where are we going?"

"To pay a visit. Afterwards we shall go back to your flat and all have supper together."

"But Raoul is waiting now. I am already late."

"He will wait patiently. He is a good boy. I have watched him and I have seen myself again in him."

A few yards down the road a black saloon Citroën car was parked. Paul opened the door for her and, seeing her hesitation, knowing the distress in her, said gently, "Get in. It is mine—honestly bought."

Sophie got in. I am a hypnotized bird, she thought, without power of flight; with him the whole of my life will be spent on the edge of fear. He killed two guards to escape . . . Honesty is only a word in his mouth. When he wants a thing he will take it, forgetting honesty, forgetting decency . . .

And in that moment, out of her weakness and fear, was born the resolution that she would not go with him. Somehow she

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would escape with Raoul. For the moment she was tied to him, but she would escape.

He drove towards the Bois de Boulogne, whistling gently and smiling to himself. She watched the road, the lovers walking under the trees, the passing swirl of headlamps, and saw now and again the reflection of light on water. Here, in the Bois, she had first met him with Maurice his younger brother—both of them gay and full of life, both of them with a hidden violence, an anger against life, which they kept close to themselves.

They crossed the bridge at Suresnes and the Seine was below them, a dark, rolling stretch of water. The pale white gleam of moored boats showed under the trees. A few minutes later he stopped the car in a quiet side road, drawing it up a little way from the entrance gate of a villa. He got out and came round and opened the door for her.

"We shall be only ten minutes," he said, and his hand was on her arm again, moving her towards the villa's gates.

She could see the house through the shrubs of a small garden. High ornamental rails enclosed the grounds, and she recognized it as one of the select little places that many wealthy Parisians preferred to flats in the city. They went up the path, but before they reached the door Paul drew her away across a small stretch of lawn towards a large lighted window. She hung back, but his grip on her arm tightened.

"Don't be afraid." The words came awkwardly from his tight-set mouth and the very sound of them made her more afraid.

"No." She stopped.

He jerked at her arm savagely and his fingers bit into her flesh. "Come!" The word was like a whipcrack.

Forcing her along, he went up to the lighted window. It was a french window and one side was partly open. Paul pushed her through, crowding close behind her. She stood in a blaze of light and heard the rustle of a curtain being drawn behind her.

It was a long low room lit by concealed lighting. There was a beautifully coloured Aubusson carpet, two china cabinets, pictures, each with its own little cowl light, soft armchairs, a long stretch of polished table holding the reflection of silver and glass, and the flicker of flames from a wood fire in the marble grate.

Sophie stood there, aware of the luxury and wealth of the room. Seated at the far end of the table was a man who, as they entered, was on the point of lighting a cigar. He sat there now, holding a match in the air. Sophie saw the flame die as he rose.

"What the devil is this?"

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It was a fat, asthmatical voice, high-pitched and surprising from such a large man. He was almost bald, about sixty, with a large loose face, folds of skin pulling at the corners of his mouth and almost hooding his eyes—an ugly, unpleasant face that Sophie felt was somehow familiar. Short and obese, his body bulking across the end of the table in a great mountain of flesh, he wore a loose blue velvet jacket, and a silk shirt open at the throat to reveal a thick red neck.

Paul Nerval moved farther into the room, taking Sophie with him, and said, " Sit down, Monsieur Montfort."

But Jules Montfort remained standing, and in an angry, spluttering voice shouted, " Who the devil are you? "

Paul laughed, a sound full of cold satisfaction. Gently, he pushed Sophie into an armchair. " This lady, Monsieur Montfort, is my wife, Madame Sophie Nerval. Ah, I see the name begins to mean something to you. And I am Paul Nerval. Does that explain? "

Sophie saw Jules Montfort drop heavily back into his chair. It did explain; for her as well as for him. The name Montfort had brought back memories.

" I understood you were dead," said Jules Montfort. He was not afraid. Sophie could see that. He was watching them both, frowning and pulling with one hand at his loose mouth.

" I am alive, monsieur, as you see." Paul smiled and from his pocket he pulled a revolver. He moved easily towards the fireplace. To one side of it stood a mahogany column with a blue-and-white vase on it. He smashed the revolver against the vase and it crashed to the ground in pieces. He did it easily, casually, seeming to pay no attention to his action.

Montfort leaned forward sharply. " Swine! " And then his eyes swept round to Sophie. " You must be happy, married to such a man," he said contemptuously.

Sophie said nothing. She closed her eyes against the beastliness. She knew now why Paul had brought her here. Whatever he did here would tie her to him for ever. No matter what she might say, no one would believe that she had not come with him willingly, sharing and helping in his revenge.

" Not dead," said Paul, " but very much alive. Six years ago, Monsieur Montfort, on a January night—you remember?—you surprised my brother Maurice and myself in your Paris house. Why should you object to robbery? You have been a robber all your life, eh? A financier, swindler—but always within the law, just within, eh? "

" You sound bitter. Is it because you knew you hadn't the intelligence to outwit the law, too, Nerval? "

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The revolver smashed into the face of a mirror over the mantelpiece, and the fracture was like a great distorted star.

Watching Paul, Sophie saw the violence alive in him. He seemed to pay no attention to what he was doing, but she knew that deep in his black heart there must be a great joy.

"Swine!"

Paul laughed. "Six years ago, monsieur, you shot my brother. And now I am going to kill you, but first you must suffer a little."

Jules Montfort reached out nervously to the table in front of him. It was set for dinner and clearly he had just finished eating. With shaking hands he pulled a brandy decanter to him and helped himself liberally. "I shot your brother in self-defence because I thought he was going to attack me."

"Liar! You shot him without cause. I loved my brother. You destroyed him. And now . . . your Ming vase, the Second Empire mirror, this Chelsea group—" Paul's hand went out and swept a set of porcelain figures from the mantelshelf. "All these you love—the Picassos, the Manets—you shall see them all destroyed before I settle with you."

Sophie could see the anguish in Jules Montfort; his large fat body was shaking with a distress he fought to control, and his face and neck were flushed darkly with his emotion.

"Paul, please . . . please!" she cried, "don't do it! Come away and I'll go with you—go anywhere, do anything, so long as you don't go on with this!"

"Keep quiet! Six years I've waited to avenge Maurice. Four years in hell on that island. The lives of two guards on my hands; and the three men who escaped in the boat with me who had to go so that I should seem to have perished with them."

He moved past Jules Montfort and smashed the glass face of a cabinet. "And this is the moment. I've watched you, monsieur, for two months. I know there is no one here but yourself . . . that you wait for a woman to come." He cleared a shelf of figures from the cabinet with a sweep of his hand. "What will you do when I take a knife to the Picassos and the Manets?"

"Oh God—no, not that!" Jules Montfort looked desperately towards Sophie. His face was twisted with agony and he spoke as though he were choking. "Madame, tell him."

"I can do nothing." Sophie's head dropped forward and her voice was faint.

With a shaking hand Montfort raised his brandy glass to his lips and drained it.

"Drink," said Paul bitterly. "Let it give you courage." He picked up a knife from the table. Slowly he began to walk towards a picture.

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Sophie jumped up and ran to him. "Paul, don't!"

"Get out of my way, Sophie."

"No, no—I can't let you do this!"

"Away!" He reached out and swept her aside. As she staggered back against the table, Jules Montfort rose to his feet. His loose mouth moving desperately, he shouted, "Don't do it, Nerval! Money, anything, but don't destroy them!"

Paul swung round, the knife raised, and said, "Before you go, you shall see what it is to suffer." He said it evenly but the vigour of his hatred and lust for revenge ran through the words like a hot current, charging them with violence.

Montfort raised his arms and began to beat at him with his fat fists, and a curious low moaning sound came from his lips, an animal noise full of anguish.

Paul pushed him away, and the man, reeling backwards, suddenly gasped and clutched at his throat, his great mouth gaping for air. He collapsed to the ground and the room trembled at the shock of his huge body hitting the carpet. He sobbed for breath, and then abruptly there was no movement in him.

"Paul!" Sophie ran to the man and knelt beside him. Paul came to her side. He looked at Jules Montfort and then slid his hand inside the loose shirt-front. After a moment he stood up and his face was twisted with a savage disappointment.

"He's dead! Damn him—he's dead!"

"And you killed him. You killed him as surely as putting a bullet into him!" cried Sophie. She ran at Paul and began to strike at him, her face marked with anger. He caught her wrists and then pushed her away.

"I didn't kill him. I wish I had. He was fat and rotten. He ate too much. He drank too much. Curse him—his heart went. He couldn't take the thought of suffering." He flung the knife from him, his face full of bitter disappointment.

"You killed him. I hate you! I'll always hate you!"

"Shut up!" His hand was raised to strike her but he held himself back. Then he smiled and his hand came down to her shoulder gently. "Let us go, Sophie. Raoul will be waiting."

Sophie moved towards the window. Raoul would be waiting. Paul knew where his power lay—in her love for the boy. She wanted to get out of the place, to be free, but she could see no freedom for herself. Always he would be with her—this thing, this man on the carpet, would hold them together.

Paul followed her, catching her at the window, his hand taking her arm. She was trembling and breathing hard.

"Gently," he said. "You will forget. We can begin again."

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He went across the lawn with her and out into the street. At the car he opened the door for her. They drove back, and all the way he talked to her, though she said nothing. He talked of their future and of the things he would do for Raoul, and she saw that he believed it, believed in the new life ahead. But she knew that nothing good or clean could be built on his past; the violence was still there, and the evil waited only for fresh provocation. The lighted road ahead was blurred by the tears she tried to hide from him.

They drew up outside the block of flats. There was an agent de police talking to a man on the pavement. Paul saw Sophie look at the agent and, smiling, sure of himself, he took her arm and moved towards the door with her.

Raoul opened the door of the flat for them. He was cheerful and unconcerned. "You worked on at the bureau, maman?"

"Yes, chéri." She bent and kissed him. "I worked late. This—" she half turned to Paul—"is a—this monsieur is going to have supper with us."

Raoul shook hands politely with Paul, and her heart was sick as she saw Paul touch the boy's cheek for an instant.

"Perhaps monsieur would like to see my goldfish in their tank?" All the boy's innocence was in his voice. Her Raoul, untouched yet by life's dark stain . . . and that was how she wanted to keep him.

"Show me the fish." Paul's hand took the boy's, and Sophie thought of Monsieur Montfort dead in his room.

"Yes, show monsieur your fish, Raoul."

She watched them go to the tank in the window. They talked away together, Paul setting himself to charm the boy.

"They're beauties. But we must get you a bigger tank, Raoul."

Sophie was asking herself where was escape, truth, freedom. The agony of decision was a pain in her. Love for Raoul she had—Paul relied on that. He knew she would never hurt Raoul, would always protect him.

But love without courage and honesty was nothing; love without the capacity to embrace suffering was doomed. The world was waiting for Raoul, and she knew the time had come when love without truth could warp the growing man in him.

Raoul turned to her, his face alight, his hand in Paul's. "Maman, may I take monsieur up to the roof to show him my pigeons?"

"Of course, chéri." She forced herself to smile and talk naturally. It was a privilege to see Raoul's pigeons. Paul's charm was working and she felt the pain tighten in her. She

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watched them go out; over his shoulder Paul smiled at her, and the triumph in the smile was like a blow.

She stood there for a moment when they were gone, and then very slowly she went into her bedroom, knowing that there was only one way to save Raoul.

She picked up the telephone from the table by the bed and forced herself to dial an emergency police call. She and Raoul would suffer, but in their suffering would be hope and truth. Distantly she could hear Raoul laughing.

★ ★ ★

## *BRUSH IT ASIDE*

**You needn't grow a beard, buy a smock, or hire a model—unless you want to. Just bring a little craft to these arty posers, and you'll find the answers come easel-y! If not, the solution on page 78 will put you in the picture. Total score should amount to 31.**

1. *You want pictures of your pets, which are, strangely enough, a lion, a bloodhound, a giraffe-necked woman, and a horse. Which of the following artists would be sure to make the most of the attractions of each: Modigliani, Landseer, Sir Alfred Munnings, and James Thurber*

2 *What artist a. drew a perfect circle freehand b. was a customs official c. had his wife exhumed d. was a dwarf*

3. *Which are the art terms in these pairs of words:*
   *a. pointilliste, punctilio*
   *b. hanged, hung*
   *c. cubist, cubit*
   *d. impressionable, impressionist*
   *e. futurist, futurity*
   *f. prospective, perspective*
   *g. on the line, draw the line*

4. *Where would you look today to find cartoons by: a. David Low b. Vicky c. Raphael d. Giles*

5. *Which artists are connected with the following books: The Moon and Sixpence; Lust for Life; Chiaroscuro; The English, Are They Human?*

6. *Which of the following media have a water-colour base: gouache, stained glass, tempera, mosaic, poster paint*

7. *What artists painted or sculpted: a. Mona Lisa b. Moses c. Guernica d. The Rake's Progress e. Rima*

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# CHANCE of a LIFETIME

**"Well, now," he said**
**"This time I'll tell you everything"**

by RAY BRADBURY

"ALIVE!"

"Dead!"

"Alive in New England, dammit."

"Died twenty years ago!"

"Pass the hat round for my fare, and I'll go myself and bring back his head!"

That's how the talk went that night. A stranger set it off with his mouthings about Dudley Stone dead. Alive! we cried. And shouldn't we know? Weren't we the last frail remnants of those who had burnt incense and read his books by the light of blazing intellectual votive candles in the 'twenties?

*The* Dudley Stone. That magnificent stylist, that proudest of American literary lions. Surely you recall the head-pounding, the cliff-jumping, the whistlings of doom that followed his writing this note to his publishers:

*Sirs, Today, aged thirty, I retire from the field, renounce writing, burn all my effects, toss my latest manuscript on the rubbish dump, cry hail and fare thee well.*

*Yrs. affect., Dudley Stone*

Earthquakes and avalanches, in that order.

"*Why?*" we kept asking ourselves.

In fine melodramatic fashion we debated if it was Women caused him to hurl his literary future away. Or the Bottle? Or Horses that outran him and stopped a fine pacer in his prime?

We freely admitted to one and all that Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck would be buried in Stone's avalanche, were he writing now. All the sadder that Stone, on the brink of his greatest work, turned one day and went off to live in a town we shall call Obscurity, by the sea best named The Past.

"Why?" That question for ever lived with those of us who had seen the glints of genius in his piebald works.

One night a few weeks ago, musing over the erosion of the years, finding each other's faces somewhat more pouched and our hairs

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more conspicuously in absence, we became enraged over the typical citizen's ignorance of Dudley Stone.

At least, we muttered, Thomas Wolfe had had a full measure of success before he jumped off the rim of Eternity. At least the critics gathered to stare after his plunge into darkness as after a meteor that made much fire in its passing. But who now remembered Dudley Stone, his coteries, his frenzied followers of the 'twenties?

"Pass the hat round," I said. "I'll travel three hundred miles, grab Dudley Stone by the pants, and say, 'Look here, Mr. Stone, why did you let us down so badly? Why haven't you written a book in twenty-five years?'"

The hat was lined with cash; I sent a telegram and took a train.

I do not know what I expected. Perhaps to find a doddering and frail praying mantis whispering about the station, blown by sea winds, a chalk-white ghost who would husk at me with the voices of grass and reeds blown in the night.

I tensed my legs in agony as my train chuffed into the station. I let myself down into a lonely countryside, a mile from the sea, wondering why I had come so far.

On a notice-board in front of the nailed-up ticket-office I found a cluster of announcements, inches thick, pasted and pinned one on top of the other for uncountable years. Leafing under, peeling away anthropological layers of printed tissue I found what I wanted. *Dudley Stone for Alderman, Dudley Stone for Sheriff, Dudley Stone for Mayor!* On up through the years his photograph, bleached by sun and rain, faintly recognizable, asked for ever more responsible positions in the life of this world near the sea. I stood reading them.

"Hey!"

And Dudley Stone plunged across the station platform behind me suddenly. "Is that you, Mr. Douglas?"

I whirled to confront this great architecture of a man, big but not in the least fat, his legs huge pistons thrusting him on, a bright flower in his lapel, a bright tie at his neck. He crushed my hand, looked down upon me like Michelangelo's God creating Adam with a mighty touch.

His face was the face of those illustrated North Winds and South Winds that blow hot and cold in ancient mariners' charts. It was the face that symbolizes the sun in Egyptian carvings, ablaze with life.

Lord! I thought. And this is the man who hasn't written in twenty years. Impossible. He's so alive it's sinful. I can hear his *heartbeat*!

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I must have stood with my eyes very wide to let the look of him cram in upon my startled senses.

"You thought you'd find Marley's Ghost," he laughed. "Admit it."

"I—"

"My wife's waiting with a New England boiled dinner; we've plenty of ale and stout. I like the ring of those words. To *ale* is not to sicken, but to revive the flagging spirit. A tricky word, that. And *stout*? There's a nice ruddy sound to it. Stout!"

A great golden watch, hung in bright chains, bounced on his waistcoat front. He gripped my elbow and charmed me along, a magician well on the way back to his cave with a luckless rabbit. "Glad to see you! I suppose you've come, as the others came, to ask the same questions, eh? Well, this time I'll tell everything!"

My heart jumped. "Wonderful!"

Behind the empty station sat an open-topped 1927-vintage Model T Ford.

"Fresh air. Drive at twilight like this, you get all the fields, the grass, the flowers, coming at you in the wind. I hope you're not one of those who tiptoe around shutting windows! Our house is like the top of a mountain. We let the weather do all our sweeping for us. Come on, hop in! Be there in no time."

Ten minutes later we swung off the highway onto a drive that had not been levelled or filled for years. Stone drove straight on over the holes and bumps, smiling steadily. Bang! We shuddered the last few yards to a wild unpainted two-storey house. The car was allowed to gasp itself away into mortal silence.

"Do you want the truth?" Stone turned to look me in the face and hold my shoulder with an earnest hand. "I was murdered by a man with a gun twenty-five years ago almost to this very day."

I sat staring after him as he leapt from the car. He was solid as a ton of stone, no ghost about him, yet I knew that somehow the truth was in what he had told me before firing himself like a cannon at the house.

"This is my wife, and this is the house, and that is our supper waiting for us! Look at our view. Windows on three sides of the living-room, a view of the sea, the land, the meadows. We nail the windows open three out of four seasons. I swear you get a smell of limes here in midsummer, and something from Antarctica, ammonia and ice-cream, come December. Sit down. Lena, isn't it nice having him here?"

"I hope you like New England boiled dinner," said Lena, now here, now there, a tall, firmly built woman with a bright

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lamp of a face that lit our table as she dealt out the heavy useful dishes made to stand the pound of giant's fists. The cutlery was solid enough to take a lion's teeth.

A great whiff of steam rose up, through which we gladly descended. I saw his plate skim by for three more helpings, and felt the ballast gather in my chest, my throat, and at last my ears. Dudley Stone poured me a brew he had made from wild Concords that had cried for mercy, he said. The wine bottle, empty, had its green glass mouth blown softly by Stone, who summoned out a rhythmic one-note tune that was quickly done.

"Well, I've kept you waiting long enough," he said, peering at me from that distance which drinking sets between people and which, at odd times in the evening, seems closeness itself. "I'll tell you about my murder. I've never told anyone before, believe me. Do you know John Oatis Kendall?"

"A minor writer in the 'twenties, wasn't he?" I said. "A few books. Burnt out by '31. Died last week."

"God rest him." Mr. Stone lapsed into a special brief melancholy from which he revived as he began to speak again.

"Yes. John Oatis Kendall, burnt out by the year 1931, a writer of great potentialities."

"Not as great as yours," I said, quickly.

"Well, just wait. We were boys together, John Oatis and I, born where the shade of an oak tree touched my house in the morning and his house at night, swam every creek in the world together, got sick together on sour apples and cigarettes, saw the same lights in the same blonde hair of the same young girl together, and in our late teens went out to seek our fortune and got knocked on the head together.

"We both did fair, and then *I* better and still better, as the years ran. If his first book got one good notice, mine got six; if I got one bad notice, he got a dozen.

"We were like two friends on a train which the shunters have uncoupled. There went John Oatis in the rear van, left behind, crying out, 'Save me! You're leaving me behind; we're on the same track!' And the conductor saying, 'Yes, but not the same *train*!' And myself yelling, '*I* believe in you, John, be of good heart, I'll come back for you!'

"And the van dwindling behind, with its red and green lamps shining in the dark, and we yelling our friendship to each other—'John, old man!' 'Dudley, old pal!'—while John Oatis went out on a dark siding behind a goods shed at midnight, and my engine, with all the flag-wavers and brass bands, boiled on towards the dawn."

Dudley Stone paused and noticed my look of general confusion.

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"All this leads up to my murder," he said. "For it was John Oatis Kendall who, in 1928, traded a few old clothes and some remaindered copies of his books for a gun and came out to this house and this room."

"He really meant to kill you?"

"Meant to, hell! He did! Bang! Have some more wine? That's better."

A strawberry shortcake was set upon the table by Mrs. Stone, while he enjoyed my gibbering suspense. Stone cut the cake into three huge chunks and handed it round, fixing me with his kindly approximation of the Ancient Mariner's eye.

There he sat, John Oatis, in that chair where you sit now, (Stone continued). Behind him, outside, in the curing-shed, seventeen hams; in our wine-cellar, five hundred bottles of the best; beyond the window, open country, the elegant sea in full lace; overhead a moon like a dish of cool cream; everywhere the full panoply of spring.

And Lena across the table, too, a willow tree in the wind, laughing at everything I said or did not choose to say, both of us thirty, mind you, thirty years old, life our magnificent carrousel, our fingers playing full chords, my books selling well, fan mail pouring upon us in crisp white founts, horses in the stable for moonlight rides to coves, where either we or the sea might whisper all we wished in the night.

And John Oatis seated there where you sit now, quietly taking the little blue gun from his pocket.

("I laughed, thinking it was a cigar-lighter of some sort," said Lena.)

But John Oatis said, quite seriously, "I'm going to kill you, Mr. Stone."

I sat there, stunned, riven; I heard a terrible slam—the coffin lid in my face! I heard coal down a black chute—earth on my buried door. They say all your past hurtles by at such times. Nonsense. The *future* does. You see your face a bloody porridge. You sit there until your fumbling mouth can say, "But why, John? what have I done to you?"

"Done!" he cried. And his eye skimmed along the vast bookshelf and the handsome brigade of books drawn stiffly to attention there, with my name on each blazing like a panther's eye in the Moroccan blackness. "Done!" he cried, mortally. And his hand itched the revolver in a sweat. "Now, John," I cautioned, "what do you want?"

"One thing more than anything else in the world," he said, "to kill you and be famous. Get my name in headlines. Be

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famous as you are famous. Be known for a lifetime and beyond as the man who killed Dudley Stone!"

"You can't mean that!"

"I do. I'll be very famous. Far more famous than I am today, in your shadow. Oh listen, here, no one in the world knows how to hate the way a writer does. Lord, how I love your work and lord, how I hate you because you write so well. Amazing ambivalence. But I can't take it any more, not being able to write as you do, so I'll make my fame the easy way. I'll cut you off before you reach your prime. They say your next book will be your very finest, your most brilliant!"

"They exaggerate."

"My guess is they're right!" he said.

I looked beyond him to Lena, who sat in her chair, frightened, but not frightened enough to scream or run and spoil the scene by bringing it too suddenly to a close.

"Calm," I said. "Calmness. Sit there, John. I ask only one minute. Then pull the trigger."

"No!" Lena whispered.

"Calmness," I said, not only to her, but to myself, and to John Oatis.

I gazed out of the open windows; I felt the wind; I thought of the wine in the cellar, the coves at the beach, the sea, the night moon like a disk of menthol cooling the summer heavens drawing clouds of flaming salt—the stars—after it in a wheel towards morning. I thought of myself only thirty, Lena thirty, our whole lives ahead. I had never climbed a mountain, I had never sailed an ocean, I had never stood for Mayor, I had never dived for pearls, I had never owned a telescope, I had never acted on a stage or built a house or read all the classics I had so wished to read. All the actions waiting to be done!

So in that almost instantaneous sixty seconds, I thought at last of my career. The books I had written, the books I *was* writing, the books I intended to write. The reviews, the sales, our huge balance in the bank.

And believe it or not, for the first time in my life I felt free of it all. I became, in one moment, a critic. I weighed it all up. On one side of the scales, I put all the boats I hadn't taken, the flowers I hadn't planted, the children I hadn't raised, all the hills I hadn't looked at, with Lena there, goddess of the harvest. In the middle I put John Oatis Kendall with his gun—the upright that held the balances. And on the empty scale opposite I laid my pen, my ink, my empty paper, my dozen books. I made some minor adjustments.

The sixty seconds were ticking by. The sweet night wind blew

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across the table. It touched a curl of hair on Lena's neck, oh lord, how softly, softly it touched . . .

The gun pointed at me. I have seen the moon craters in photographs, and that hole in space called the Great Coal Sack nebula, but neither was as big, take my word, as the mouth of that gun.

" John," I said at last, " do you hate me *that* much? Because I've been lucky and you haven't? "

" Yes, dammit! " he cried.

It was almost funny he should envy me. I was not that much better a writer than he. A flick of the wrist made the difference.

" John," I said quietly to him, " if you want me dead, I'll *be* dead. Would you like for me to never write again? "

" I'd like nothing better! " he cried. " Get ready! " He aimed at my heart.

" All right," I said, " I'll never write again."

" What? " he said.

" We're old, old friends; we've never lied to each other, have we? Then take my word, from this night on I'll never put pen to paper."

" Oh *God*," he said, and laughed with contempt and disbelief.

" There," I said, nodding my head towards the desk near him, " are the only original copies of the two books I've been working on for the last three years. I'll burn one in front of you now. The other you yourself may throw in the sea. Clean out the house, take anything faintly resembling a manuscript, burn my published books too. Here." I got up.

He could have shot me then, but I had him fascinated. I tossed one manuscript on the hearth and touched a match to it.

" No! " Lena said.

I turned. " I know what I'm doing," I said. She began to cry. John Oatis Kendall simply stared at me, bewitched.

I brought him the other unpublished manuscript. " Here," I said, tucking it under his right toe so his foot was a paperweight. I went back and sat down. The wind was blowing and the night was warm and Lena was white as apple blossom there across the table.

I said, " From this day forward I will never write again."

At last John Oatis managed to say, " How can you do this? "

" To make everyone happy," I said. " To make you happy because we'll be friends again, eventually. To make Lena happy because I'll be just her husband again and no agent's performing seal. And myself happy because I'd rather be a live man than a dead author. A dying man will do anything, John. Now, take my last novel and get along with you."

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We sat there, the three of us, just as we three are sitting tonight. There was a smell of lemons and limes and camellias. The ocean roared on the stony coastland below; lord, what a lovely moonlit sound.

And at last, picking up the manuscript, John Oatis took it, like my body, out of the room. He paused at the door and said, "I believe you." And then he was gone. I heard him drive away. I put Lena to bed.

That was one of the few nights in my life I ever walked alone down by the shore, but walk I did, taking deep breaths and feeling my arms and legs and my face with my hands, crying like a child, walking and wading in the surf to feel the cold salt water foaming about me in a million suds.

Dudley Stone paused. Time had made a stop in the room; Time was in another year. The three of us sat there, enchanted with his telling of the murder.

"And did he destroy your last novel?" I asked.

Dudley Stone nodded. "A week later one of the pages drifted up on the shore. He must have thrown them over the cliff, a thousand pages. I see it in my mind's eye, a flock of white seagulls it might seem, flying down to the water and going out with the tide at four in the black morning. Lena ran up the beach with that single page in her hand, crying, 'Look, look!' And when I saw what she handed me, I tossed it back in the ocean."

"Don't tell me you honoured your promise!"

Dudley Stone looked at me steadily. "What would *you* have done in a similar position? Look at it this way: John Oatis did me a favour. He didn't kill me. He didn't shoot me. He took my word. He honoured my word. He let me live. He let me go on eating and sleeping and breathing. Quite suddenly he had broadened my horizons. I was so grateful that, standing on the beach hip-deep in water that night, I cried. I was grateful. Do you really *understand* that word? Grateful he had let me live when he had it in his hand to annihilate me."

Mrs. Stone rose; the dinner was ended. She cleared the table; we lit cigars; and Dudley Stone strolled with me over to his office-at-home, a roll-top desk, its jaws propped wide with parcels, and papers and ink-bottles, a typewriter, documents, ledgers, indexes.

"It was all coming to the boil in me. John Oatis simply spooned the froth off the top so that I could see the brew. It was very clear," said Dudley Stone. "Writing was always so much mustard and gallweed to me; fidgeting words on paper,

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experiencing vast depressions of heart and soul. Watching the greedy critics graph me up, chart me down, slice me like sausage, eat me at midnight breakfasts. Work of the worst sort. I was *ready* to throw in my hand. My trigger was set. Boom! There was John Oatis! Look here."

He rummaged in the desk and brought forth handbills and posters. "I had been *writing* about living. Now I wanted to *live*. *Do* things, instead of tell about things. I stood for the local education committee; I won. I ran for Alderman; I won. I ran for Mayor; I won! Sheriff! I won! I shook a lot of hands, saw a lot of life, did a lot of things.

"We've lived every way there is to live, with our eyes and noses and mouths, with our ears and hands. We've climbed hills and painted pictures—there are some there on the wall! We've been three times around the world! I even delivered our baby son, unexpectedly. He's grown and married now—lives in New York. We've done everything over and over again." Stone paused and smiled. "Come on out into the garden; we've set up a telescope. Would you like to see the rings of Saturn?"

We stood in the garden, and the wind blew from a thousand miles at sea, and while we were standing there, looking at the stars through the telescope, Mrs. Stone went down into the midnight cellar for a rare Spanish wine.

It was noon the next day when we reached the lonely station after a hurricane trip across the jouncing meadows from the sea. Mr. Dudley Stone let the car have its head while he talked to me, laughing, smiling, pointing to this or that outcrop of neolithic stone, this or that wildflower, falling silent only after we had parked the car and were waiting for the train to come and take me away.

"I suppose," he said, looking at the sky, "you think I'm quite insane."

"No, I'd never say that."

"Well," said Dudley Stone, "John Oatis Kendall did me one other favour."

"What was that?"

Stone hitched around conversationally in the patched leather seat. "He helped me get out while the going was good. Deep down inside I must have had a pretty fair picture of my future. I knew what none of my critics knew: that I was headed nowhere but down. The two books John Oatis destroyed were very bad. They would have killed me deader than Oatis possibly could. So he helped me decide, unwittingly, what I might not have had the courage to decide myself, to bow gracefully out while the cotillion

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was still on, while the Chinese lanterns still cast flattering pink lights on my pale, scholarly complexion.

" I had seen too many writers up, down, and out, hurt, unhappy, suicidal. The combination of circumstance, coincidence, subconscious knowledge, relief, and gratitude to John Oatis Kendall just for *being alive* was fortuitous, to say the least.

" And then I had the pleasure of seeing myself compared to all the great when I announced my departure from the literary scene. Few authors in recent history have bowed out to such publicity. It was a lovely funeral. I looked, as they say, natural.

" And the echoes lingered. His *next* book, the critics cried, would have been *it* ! A masterpiece! I had them panting, waiting. Little did they know. Even now, a quarter century later, my readers, who were college boys then, make sooty excursions on draughty branch-line trains to solve the mystery of why I've made them wait so long for my ' masterpiece.'

" Thanks to John Oatis Kendall I still have a little reputation; it has receded slowly, painlessly. The next year I might have died by my own writing hand. How much better to cut your own van off the train, before others can do it for you.

" My friendship with John Oatis Kendall? It came back. It took time, of course. But he was out here to see me in 1947; it was a nice day, all round, like old times. And now he's dead and at last I've told someone everything.

" What will you tell your friends in the city? They won't believe a word of this. But it *is* true, I swear it, as I sit here and breathe God's good air and look at the callouses on my hands, and begin to resemble the faded handbills I used when I ran for County Treasurer." We stood up on the station platform.

" Good-bye, and thanks for coming and opening your ears and letting my world crash in on you. God bless all your curious friends. Here comes the train! I've got to run: Lena and I are going to a Red Cross whist drive down the coast this afternoon! Good-bye! "

I watched the dead man stride and leap across the platform, felt the plankings shudder, saw him jump into his Model T, heard it lurch under his bulk, saw him bang the floorboards with a big foot, start the engine, race it, turn, smile, wave to me, and then roar off and away towards that suddenly brilliant town called Obscurity on the shore of a dazzling sea called The Past.

★ ★ ★

## *SUB HUMAN?*

*She's so dumb she thinks a metronome is a little man on the Paris Underground.*

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# BLONDES PREFER GENTLEMEN

**A little thing like a kiss shouldn't bother anyone**

by JACQUES GILLIES

AS the cutter carried them swiftly away across the harbour, Charles Blake said, " Well, it's only for two, three months at the most, Rilla. You'll like it."

The cutter took a wide circle to avoid the creaming bows of a Greek caique and ran on past anchored warships and a dirty coaster. " Mind you, it's the crossroads of the world. Last two girls we sent out here both went riding off into the sunset, one with an American naval officer and the other with some Balkan Count." He paused. " But you're twenty-six. More settled."

The way he said it, Rilla felt like an old hag. She looked back briefly at the liner that had brought them from Bordeaux, and intercepted the ardent gaze of Captain La Salle, who was returning from furlough to the French Legation. The Captain, who had dined with them on the ship, gave her a warm Gallic smile and saluted. Rilla, smiling faintly back, felt younger again.

Charles Blake was searching the long line of wharves and warehouses for the quay. " This is an important contract, Rilla, *real* money. And what do you think? The last costing sheet we had from Harrison was written in the margin of a piece of French newspaper. That's the sort of thing you've got to stop. We want proper records, and Harrison just isn't a desk man." Charles Blake looked at his watch. " I hope he's not late. I've only got two hours before my plane."

As the ship's boat drew close to the quay his eyes ranged over the crowd. After a moment he said, " There's Harrison. By the jetty. The tall one."

Rilla's eyes swept the line of people and stopped at a tall, wide-shouldered figure, topped by a sweep of blue-black hair that glittered in the sunlight like a crow's wing. Harrison wore jeans that had been bleached to the same colour as the Mediterranean and an open khaki shirt. She said, " Does it talk? "

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"He may look rough, Rilla, but he's the best salvage engineer this side of heaven, which is a record that's likely to stand. He'll never go *there*."

The engine coughed and stopped and they went bobbing in alongside the steps. Rilla looked up as she heard a shout. "How are you, Charles!" Harrison's deep, strong voice cut across the native babble. But he wasn't looking at Charles Blake: he was staring hard down at Rilla. An Arab boatman held the cutter to the steps with a boat-hook and they went up.

Rilla saw Harrison shoulder past a white-gloved native policeman and come towards them. He grabbed Charles Blake by the hand. "Good to see you, boss!" Over Blake's shoulder his eyes flicked to Rilla's ankles and up again as quickly as a gunman's. "Hi," he said.

"Hullo," said Rilla. Behind her veil her eyes were composed.

Harrison turned his employer round and pushed him along through the crowd. Rilla, following, heard him say, "Where do you find these lambs for the slaughter, C.B.? Smithfield?"

Charles Blake said smoothly, "I think you'll find Miss Edwards will stay the course."

"Maybe."

They entered the glare of a car park. An Arab boy was sitting loosely in a battered jeep. He rolled to his feet as they came up. Harrison said, "The luggage is coming in on a lighter, Ali. You pick up Miss Edwards's things and bring them in a taxi. O.K.?"

"O.K." Ali walked round Rilla, his dark eyes liquid with admiration. Blake climbed into the back and Rilla eased herself onto the front seat beside Harrison. The sun-dried leather of the seat was scorching through the thin fabric of her dress.

The engine roared and fumes rose up through the floor. They went tearing out into the street and pushed through a busy market with the horn tooting continuously. The wind, whipping through the open car, pulled at her skirt, and Rilla, holding it down, looked quickly sideways in time to see Harrison grinning.

The jeep roared onto a white road that climbed the escarpment through a long avenue of date palms. Beyond the green of the palms the white walls of distant villas winked. At the top of the avenue they rolled across a small plateau and then down the other side to a sandy beach. The glare took on a merciless quality. Rilla unpinned her veil and felt in her bag for sun-glasses.

As she fitted them on, the jeep bumped sharply off the road onto a track and pulled up in a spurt of dust in front of a low white building shaded by jacaranda trees. Half a mile out in the bay, two or three lighters were lashed together and a winch was grinding. From another lighter, moored close in, a long line of

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chanting natives passed cases from hand to hand to a warehouse on the beach.

Harrison got out and waved a hand. " There's the job, C.B. A week ahead of schedule. How long have you got? "

Charles Blake joined them in the heat, dabbing at his face with a handkerchief. " My plane leaves in about two hours."

" Right. I'll lend you a pair of wellingtons and run you out." He led the way into the villa. Rilla, following him along the passage, noticed with distaste the crescent stains of sweat under his arms. He opened a door and stood looking down at her. His eyes were ironic. " The Y.W.C.A.'s full up. You'll have to rough it here with Ali and me in the meantime. There's a retired clergyman and his wife along the coast who may take a paying guest later. We'll see."

Rilla looked round the small, pleasant, lime-washed room. She said coldly, " You needn't bother. If I don't like it here I'll make my own arrangements when I've had time to look round."

" O.K.," said Harrison. " Ali'll be here in a minute. We'll see you later."

Rilla was washing out her stockings when she heard them come back from the boat. They stood on the verandah and she could hear Harrison talking technically about currents and water pressure. After a while a chair scraped and Blake called her.

When she went out, he had his hat and briefcase in his hand. He held her lightly by the elbow. " I've seen the office, girlie. You've got a month's overtime in front of you."

Rilla smiled wanly. Across the compound she could see Harrison already hunched in the jeep. Blake, sensing her thoughts, said, " He's all right."

Rilla looked away. " I think he's horrible."

He walked her towards the car. " The contract's only got two months to run, and you heard him say they're already a week ahead of schedule. You won't have time to notice him." He shook her arm in a rough, friendly way and got into the jeep. Harrison drove off without giving her a glance.

The jeep paused in the gateway to let a battered tourer come in. Rilla saw Ali in the front of it and her luggage piled up behind. Ali carried the cases in, and afterwards there was a noisy argument in the compound.

When Ali came back, she said, " What's the matter, Ali? "

" These taxi-boys bloody robbers."

Rilla put her hands behind her. " Ali, while I'm here I don't want to hear you use that particular word again."

" What's the matter? Mr. Harrison use it all the time."

" Nevertheless," said Rilla, " you will stop using it now."

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"All right, Miss Edwards. No more say robbers."

"Not robbers." A flush spread across Rilla's cheekbones to the edge of her hair. "The other word."

"All right." Ali grinned at her innocently. "You seen around?"

"Not yet. I think . . ."

"Come on, I show you now." Ali walked proudly in front of her. "Bathroom here," he said.

Rilla looked at the basin and the Victorian hip-bath and the buckets. "No water?"

"I bring water."

They went past the kitchen into the sitting-room. Above the fireplace was a large portrait of a blonde in black chiffon sprawled across a divan, holding a telephone. It looked as if it had been cut from a French periodical. Rilla regarded it for a moment, a finger to her temple. Then she reached up and tore it down.

Ali made a sad, clucking noise. "That's Rosie. Mr. Harrison and me say good morning to her every day."

"You can say good morning to me, instead," said Rilla in a matter-of-fact voice. She screwed the picture up and dropped it in the fireplace. Going back to her room, she said over her shoulder, "I think Mr. Harrison is a bad man, Ali."

"No, miss. He is good man. English gentleman."

"English, perhaps," said Rilla angrily. "But certainly *not* a gentleman."

She began to unpack and was delving into the second case when she heard the jeep return. After a moment she heard the shuffle of Harrison's espadrilles on the stone floor and he knocked ostentatiously on her open door.

With stockings over one arm and a black nylon nightgown over the other, Rilla turned to face him. "Yes?" she said coolly.

He lounged in the doorway. "I shouldn't unpack it all if I were you."

"But there are things I need."

"I'd try it here a couple of days first. You might save yourself a lot of bother."

"It's no bother," said Rilla, non-committally. She saw Harrison staring with unashamed appreciation at her black nylon nightgown and whipped it behind her back.

"Just like Rosie's," said Harrison mildly. He walked off, leaving her feeling faintly ridiculous.

She called Ali, and he came running in wearing a gleaming white djellaba. "Yes, Miss Edwards?"

"I want a hot bath," said Rilla. "And then I want a boiled egg and tea on a tray in here."

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" No dinner? no dinner like Mr. Harrison?"

" No dinner," said Rilla firmly. " I'm going to bed early."

Rilla woke when the heat of the sun was already seeping into the room. Away in the distance she could hear the chant of the native workmen and the surge of diesel engines. When eventually she wandered into the dining-room, it was empty.

Ali brought her scalding coffee and hot French bread.

" Where's Mr. Harrison, Ali? "

" He work. Two, three hours."

" Oh."

After breakfast, Rilla was halfway to the office building on the beach when Ali caught her up. He gave her an enormous sun-hat with a brim that was shoulder-wide. " Mr. Harrison buy it yesterday. Special for you."

Rilla dropped it on her head and walked on again across the sand. When she was closer, she saw Harrison come out of the foreman's hut. He stood watching her approach, looked at her bare legs, at her plain linen frock, at the hat. " Hi," he said.

" Good morning. Sorry I'm late, Mr. Harrison, but you should have called me. I don't want any special privileges."

" Don't worry, you won't get any. I let you sleep because I was diving this morning." He led the way over to a short Nissen hut with a canvas side. As he held the tarpaulin back for her, he said, " This is where you work."

A little, spectacled man stood up beside his desk. Harrison said, " And this is Mr. Oubadieh. He's a Syrian and a thief. All his family are on the Company payroll. Uncles, aunts, brothers-in-law . . ."

" Oh no, Mr. Harrison," said the Syrian in a soft, reproachful voice. " Only my blood relatives." He smiled at Rilla. " And of course," he added, " only those actually living in North Africa. I crossed the others off last week. I swear it."

" O.K.," said Harrison dryly. He looked down at Rilla. " This is what you do. Subcontractors' book—" he held it up— " check it against the payments. Then you check the payments against the worksheets. Right? "

" Right," said Rilla.

" And on Thursdays you type the progress report for London. I leave the accounts side blank, you fill it in. Right? "

" Right," said Rilla again.

" And we don't stop for lunch. Ali brings us down a salad. And Mr. Oubadieh answers the phone because hardly anyone around here understands English. Now come outside again."

Rilla followed him into the sun. He stood looking down at her

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for a moment with his eyes screwed up against the glare. Rilla could see that his hair was streaked with sweat and that his forearms were caked with fine sand. He was looking awfully tough.

" Here's the key of the safe. Lock everything up when you finish. And if there's anything you don't know, ask me and not Mr. Oubadieh." He lifted his fingers suddenly and tipped the brim of her hat. " And wear that whenever you step outside. That's an order."

He grinned cheekily at her and strode off towards the boats.

For the next week she hardly saw him. Harrison ate his breakfast off the shelf in the bathroom while he shaved, and his lunch out on the lighters with the men. He came in late at night, bathed, and went to bed. He had just been into the office one morning with the progress report when the telephone rang.

Mr. Oubadieh looked across at Rilla with surprise. " For you, Miss Edwards."

" For me? "

" It is Captain La Salle."

" Oh." She took the receiver. " Hullo? " Mr. Oubadieh sat down beside her, benignly attentive. Rilla waved him away. " But how did you know where I was? " she asked.

" I ascertained your forwarding address from the Post Office, mademoiselle. There is a thé dansant at the Metro Hotel this evening. I shall call for you at six? "

" I—I'm not certain. I don't know whether . . ."

" You will enjoy it," said Captain La Salle firmly. " At six, then? "

" Very well," said Rilla. She hung up.

Mr. Oubadieh watched her with bright eyes. " You would like Captain La Salle put on the payroll? It can be arranged? "

" No," said Rilla. " Nor anybody else," she added.

Mr. Oubadieh returned sadly to his accounts.

When Rilla returned to the villa in the evening she was surprised to see Harrison already sprawled in a deck-chair on the verandah. The table beside him was laid with cups.

" Join me," he said.

Rilla looked at the thick Turkish coffee and shuddered. " No, thanks."

" O.K." He gave himself a leisurely flick with his fly-whisk. " I've been thinking about your recreation. I'm not a social man myself, but if you want Ali to drive you anywhere, just say so."

" Thank you, Mr. Harrison."

" There's a trip round the inland villages that's supposed to be quite amusing."

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"Actually," said Rilla quickly, "I'm going out tonight. I—er—have a date."

Harrison was filling his pipe. "Yep. I know," he said, without looking up. "I wouldn't keep it if I were you. Captain La Salle is definitely *not* a gentleman."

Rilla felt a little prick of anger as she realized that both Ali and Mr. Oubadieh told him everything. "So I'm being spied on."

"Oh no. It's just that we talk about each other all the time. There's nothing else to do."

"And you rushed back from work to warn me. How nice." Rilla ran up the steps. "Shall I tell you something, Mr. Harrison?"

"I probably know it already."

"Not this. I don't intend to be ordered about in my free time. You can sit at home and gossip with the servants if you like, but don't ask me to."

"It's quite interesting sometimes." He grinned up at her impertinently.

Rilla's hands hurt with clenching. "Your trouble is," she said quickly, "that you've been away from civilization too long. You've forgotten how to behave, if you ever knew. And I certainly don't intend to spend my evenings cooped up with a boor." She walked inside.

When she turned up the lamp in her room she saw that Ali had laid out her ballet-length frock on the bed. She slipped into it. While she was zipping it up she heard Harrison get up and go into the sitting-room. After a moment he called, "Put some citronella behind your ears, it'll keep the mosquitoes away. It's no protection against La Salle, though."

Rilla heard a car lurch into the compound and accelerate up to the door. She picked up her coat and ran down the passage.

Rilla's eyes swept the café to which Phillip La Salle had brought her. "I don't really care for it," she said, and was annoyed to find that there was a flutter in her voice. The Metro Hotel was an hour behind them on the other side of the town.

La Salle raised his eyebrows. His hand remained possessively on her elbow. "Life in the native quarter. What could be more interesting?" He continued to guide her towards a table.

A native waited by the chairs with a rack of wine bottles round his neck. La Salle took two and paid for them. Rilla set her teeth. She realized that she was in a place where no nice English girl ought to be. It was extremely unpleasant, but it was even more humiliating to know that Harrison had been right. She realized that she had not the slightest idea in which direction the

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camp lay, and even if she had there was no way of getting there.

La Salle was talking to a drunken matelot who sat at the next table with a native girl. The matelot's feverish eyes swept over Rilla and he spoke thickly in French to La Salle, who laughed. An accordion in the corner had started to play *Avalon*. Rilla looked wildly about her. She stood up suddenly. "Excuse me," she said, and ran.

She had reached the head of the steps before La Salle shouted after her. She ran on past a native porter and along the pavement to his car. She wrenched desperately at the door. It was locked. As she looked over her shoulder she saw the battered jeep.

"Hi," said Harrison, lazily.

Rilla almost sobbed with relief. She fled into the road and clambered in beside him. "Thank God," she said. She looked at him. "How did you know where I was?"

Harrison struck a match and dipped it to his pipe. "La Salle always brings his women here."

"Oh!" Rilla gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

"As I told you," Harrison kicked the starter without looking down, "he's definitely *not* a gentleman."

Rilla sat silently with her hands in her lap while the car roared up the hill. Below in the harbour the lights from the ships dappled the darkened water. A moon hung above the desert like a brass gong. Harrison was singing *The Last Rose of Summer* and Rilla felt that, in some obscure way, it intended an insult towards her. When they left the jeep she stood bare-headed, facing him.

"I want you to know I'm grateful," she said primly. "And I realize now that you were quite right to warn me."

Harrison looked down at her with his hands on his hips. "Shall I tell you something, Miss Edwards?"

"Yes?" said Rilla.

"Shall I tell you that my actions were not motivated by any personal regard for your safety, but purely because I could not afford to have this contract slowed up by the office staff making a fool of itself. Would that make you feel any better?"

"Yes," said Rilla. She nodded vigorously. "Yes, it would."

"Well, it's not true," said Harrison flatly.

"Oh?" She stared up at him, her face as pale as a magnolia in the moonlight. She was aware that he was standing as tensely as an animal, and she swallowed nervously.

Suddenly his arms shot out and grabbed her shoulders so that she squeaked involuntarily. Then he seemed to lift her straight up. For a moment she sniffed a mixture of petrol and carbolic soap and then his lips were firm against her own. She clung to

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him instinctively, and then, as suddenly again, she was dropped back on her feet.

Harrison spun her about. "That'll make up for what you missed with the Captain." His hand pushed her shoulder lightly. "Go to bed."

Rilla ran across the compound and into the house. Without turning on the light, she stripped off her dress and fumbled her way under the mosquito-net. Then she lay wide-eyed in the darkness with her hands clenched.

She heard Harrison walk down the passage past her door. In the bathroom he hummed *The Last Rose of Summer* erratically while he cleaned his teeth. He came out of the bathroom and the door of his bedroom slammed. Through it Rilla heard the muffled thuds as he kicked off his espadrilles and the sudden protest of the bed as he rolled into it. The beating of her heart subsided, and she was aware of the scrape of cicadas in the garden and the scent of an oleander bush stealing into the room.

After a long time she slept.

Rilla, sitting in the breakfast-room, heard him come down the passage. He sat down opposite her with his chin in his hands. Rilla looked up once into his face and then away again.

"Rilla," he said, using her Christian name for the first time, "I hope you're not going to let a little thing like a kiss bother you."

She looked down at her plate. "It's not bothering me."

"Good. This contract's important." Harrison looked sideways and saw Ali backing into the room on his knees. He had a paintbrush and pot in one hand. "What are you doing, Ali?"

Ali looked over his shoulder, grinning. "Missee say make white line through house. She say . . ."

Rilla, trying to sip her coffee unconcernedly, said, "It's a new rule, Mr. Harrison." She pointed vaguely to both sides of the room. "Your half . . . my half. Then we won't get in each other's way. The bathroom's neutral," she went on, speaking very quickly, "and belongs to the one in possession. That way we . . ."

Harrison stood up and kicked his chair over. "Listen—" He came round the table.

"The line!" said Rilla anxiously.

"To hell with the line! I don't agree. You're here to run the office, not to organize me."

"I'm afraid I—I insist."

"Are you afraid of me?"

"That's not the point."

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"It is the point. Just because you've been kissed for once you want to start running up barbed wire all round the place. Ever since you came here you've been mincing about like a Sunday-school teacher, running me down to the servants, telling Ali I'm not a gentleman. And then you run off with a louse like La Salle."

"I admit I made a—a mistake about Captain La Salle."

"Shut up!"

"Yes," said Rilla weakly.

"Now I'll tell you something."

"I'm quite prepared to be reasonable." Rilla tried to say it with bright understanding.

"You don't have to be anything. If you can't trust yourself without drawing lines everywhere, then this isn't the place for you. You're going back into your room, then you're going to pack your fancy bags, then you're going out of here on the midday plane."

"I absolutely refuse."

"You have no choice. I'm the boss here. You go!"

"You have no right to send me."

"I have no right? Who do you—"

"Will you stop shouting! I'm not deaf."

"I'll shout as much as I like in my own house."

"Not this side of the line."

Harrison took two strides across the line. "Boo!" he said. "Nobody draws lines round me." He strode towards her.

"The line," warned Rilla, retreating down the passage.

"To hell with the line!" Harrison followed her.

Rilla turned and darted into her bedroom. Harrison kicked the door of it. "Now start packing!"

"I shan't," called Rilla. "And please go away."

"If you won't pack yourself," said Harrison, "I'll pack for you." He lifted his foot and crashed it against the lock.

"Stop!" yelled Rilla.

Harrison stood back two paces. "Will you pack, then?"

"Certainly not!"

He hurled himself forward, shoulder foremost. There was a splintering crash and the door leaned crazily inwards. Rilla stood by the dressing-table with a hairbrush raised. Her nostrils were flared. "Get out!" she said, and threw it.

Harrison ducked it and came on. Mirrors, combs, and cosmetic jars flew towards him in an angry stream. Harrison continued walking through them. Finally a box of powder burst weakly on his chest. By the time the grains had settled he was beside her, pinning her arms to the wall. "You great baboon!" she said.

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Harrison held her easily while she fought herself to exhaustion. Finally she collapsed against him, sobbing with helpless rage. " Hell-cat," he said, and pushed her chin back.

" Don't," said Rilla between her clenched teeth.

" You said I wasn't a gentleman." Harrison kissed her.

Rilla, struggling, felt the iron of his muscles through his thin shirt. " Let—me—go! "

Harrison let her go.

Suddenly he seemed calm and serious. He looked out into the glare and back again. Then he brushed some of the powder off his front and lifted his hand to sniff his fingers. " What about it, Rilla? " he said absent-mindedly.

Rilla stole a glance at him. " What about . . . what? "

" You and me."

He leaned a hand to the wall and grinned cheekily down at her. Rilla's eyes were round with disbelief.

" Are you proposing to me, Harrison? "

" I am," he said in a level voice. " But don't expect me to go down on my knees like a camel."

" I hate you."

" I hate you, too." He picked her up and Rilla found to her surprise that she wasn't resisting. After a while Harrison said, " Life is going to be interesting."

Rilla, with her hands locked behind his neck and her hair across his shoulder, said, " Harrison, I insist you marry me right away. Today. I don't want any nonsense with you."

" O.K."

" Now. This minute," said Rilla firmly.

Harrison put her down and kissed her nose. " O.K.," he said again. " I'll go and get the jeep and we'll see about it."

While he was going down the passage, Ali grinned at him. " I told you, Mr. Harrison. I told you she crazy about you."

" Shut up," said Harrison, and cuffed his head.

A minute later Rilla heard the jeep roar up to the door. She picked a powder-puff off the floor and dabbed hurriedly at her nose. The next moment she was running down the passage. Ali said, " I told you good idea, this line, Miss Edwards. I told you it make Mr. Harrison plenty mad."

" Be quiet," said Rilla furiously. She ran on out into the sunlight.

★ *Jacques Gillies, 35, born in New Zealand, lives in a caravan in Cornwall with his artist wife. Author of five Westerns and a straight novel, " Voyagers in Aspic," he has also been a lobsterman, film publicity hound, stunt man for a travelling variety act, village publican, and church organist.*

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**Every pleasure has its season,**
**Love and drinking are no treason**

*Zeno, Plato, Aristotle,*
*All were lovers of the bottle:*
*Poets, painters and musicians,*
*Churchmen, lawyers and physicians,*
*All admire a pretty lass,*
*All require a cheerful glass.*

HENRY CAREY,
*The Dragon of Wantley*

## *Pick Me Up*

"We went to the pictures, and then Leslie took me to ever such a posh place for supper. And after supper I changed my dress in the Ladies, and we went on to another place to dance—lots of foreigners and a crooner all in red sequins, ever so romantic, it was."

"Plenty of drinks?"

"Oo, yes, but I wouldn't have any," she said, with a touch of regret . . . "Anyway, after we'd been dancing for a while, Leslie said what about a short lemon, that wouldn't hurt a fly. He said he was getting fallen arches, and he needed support. So he took me into the bar and we had a short lemon. Gosh, it did taste funny! It kept making my eyes water. We had ever such a laugh about it. Leslie said it was a continental recipe from Holland. So we had a lot of these short lemons, and then we sat talking for a while in a little sort of nish with curtains, just outside the bar."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, I don't think the lemon agreed with me. Too acid, or

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something. Because I felt ever so funny. I think I must have fainted or something. I don't remember, reely."

Richard and Andrew exchanged a look.

"When I came round, I was lying on a settee in the bar. 'Course, the bar was closed, but the boss was a friend of Leslie's. So he gave me a short orange to pull me round. He said the orange couldn't upset me. Or maybe it was Leslie said that. I don't remember, I was still feeling a bit funny."

KATHARINE FARRER, *The Missing Link*

## *Nightcap*

*Brave lads in olden musical centuries*
*Sang, night by night, adorable choruses,*
*Sat late by alehouse doors in April*
*Chaunting in joy as the moon was rising.*

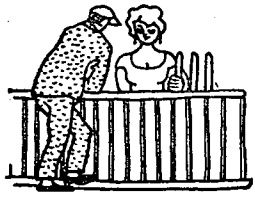
*Moon-seen and merry, under the trellises,*
*Flush-faced they play'd with old polysyllables*
*Spring scents inspired, old wine diluted:*
*Love and Apollo were there to chorus . . .*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON,
*Alcaics: to H.F.B.*

## *Beverage Report*

The best part of a bottle of champagne may be allowed at dinner; this is not only venial but salutary. A few tumblers of brandy and soda-water are greatly to be commended, for they are cooling. Whisky cannot reasonably be objected to, for it is an absolute necessary, and does not come under the head of intemperance, but rather, as Dogberry says, or ought to say, "it comes by nature." Gingerbeer I hold to be a dropsical, insufficient, and unmanly beverage. I pray you avoid it.

WILLIAM SCROPE, *Days of Deer-Stalking in the Forest of Atholl*



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## *Knock 'em Back*

*Like torn-up newsprint the nonchalant snow*
*Creaked down incessantly on Red Lion Square.*
*Clock chimes were deadbeats. Clang! Nowhere to go!*
*The cabbies drove with marble stare,*
*The snowed-up statues had a pensive air.*

*Inside the pub the spirits flowed,*
*And Sal and Kate the guardees' tanners shared;*
*Out in the dusk the newsboys crowed,*
*And to infinity the lamp-posts flared,*
*The gas-blue lilies of the Old Kent Road.*

CHARLES SPEAR, *1894 in London*

## *Rum Do*

Matvey brought ham and champagne. The champagne turned out to be frozen solid; the ham could have been chopped with an axe, it was all glistening with ice; but *à la guerre comme à la guerre.* "May the New Year bring happiness." Yes indeed, new happiness . . .

The frozen champagne did not exactly please the superintendent. I added half a glass of rum to his wine. This new "*half-and-half*" had a great success.

The driver, whom I also invited to join us, was still more extreme in his views; he sprinkled pepper into the glass of foaming wine, stirred it with a spoon, drank it off at one gulp, uttered a painful sigh and almost with a moan added: "It did scorch fine!"

ALEXANDER HERZEN,
*My Past and Thoughts*

## *Passing Out*

*Here sleeps in peace a Hampshire*
*Grenadier,*
*Who caught his death by drinking cold*
*small Beer.*
*Soldiers be wise from his untimely fall*
*And when yere hot drink Strong or none*
*at all.*

*Epitaph on Thomas Thetcher, 1764*
*outside Winchester Cathedral*

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# Killer's Choice

**Both men knew that the time was near**

by PATRICK MEAGHER

THERE was murder in Kamara's heart as he gazed with dark eyes over that stretch of the Indian Ocean that is called the Gulf of Manaar, between the mainland and Ceylon. He was not very tall but the fine proportions of his limbs gave the impression of height. At his feet the endless surf pounded against the beach, and at intervals along the water's edge, bundles of wood were stacked ready for the night's ceremony.

Behind him the sun was dropping beyond the hills and the light stole slowly away from the land; the red earth of cotton fields had already darkened into black; and in the background the closely growing tamarind trees seemed thick forests, unpeopled and menacing.

Tomorrow would dawn fine.

Kamara turned his curly head away from the east and, hitching up his loincloth, walked up the sloping beach of white sand to his weathered house above the foreshore. It rested among other such humble mud-and-plaster homes, which formed the little community. For centuries the menfolk of the village had been fishermen, but every spring they forsook the fish and, during the few weeks the season lasted, they dived for pearls.

Kamara sat down outside his house and started to sharpen the ironwood he carried in his hand. The point was vicious now but it was necessary to be sure of its keenness, for tomorrow's dawn would see the opening of the season, and tomorrow the ironwood was needed not to ward off sharks but to kill a man.

Presently he was joined by his younger brother, Jawan. The boy squatted beside him and, putting his feet in the warm sand, let it run through his toes. When he spoke, the voice coming from one of his age seemed unnaturally deep; but Jawan was about to become a pearl-diver and it would not be fitting to appear unmanly.

"Is it not time the fires were lit, Kamara? The night draws on."

"Have patience, brother. When you have experienced as many seasons as I, this night will seem as others."

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" I shall stay awake till we reach the banks, and then you will see the basket filled with shells when I have done my dive."

Kamara gently touched his brother's caste-mark. " You should know it is not right for a Brahmin to boast."

" Since our father was killed, you are known as the best diver along the coast, and even in Tuticorin they tell of Kamara, son of Nagaraja. I too wish to gain that reputation."

But Kamara did not answer. His brooding eyes surveyed the dusk as he thought of his father whom he had loved so well, and he lived again the last day of the previous season.

He remembered how, from the side of the boat, he had peered through the water as Nagaraja went down in his final plunge; he remembered the violent pull on the signal cord, a moment later, and the feverish haul on the line which came up light—without his father; he remembered Sayed Azad breaking surface with the warning cry of " Sharks! " He remembered the peaceful calm of the sunlit sea, when all the other divers had scrambled back into their boats, then the widening pink-red stain of his father's slowly rising blood. Above all he remembered the tell-tale discoloration at the end of Sayed Azad's ironwood, with the tiny piece of human flesh still adhering. Two pairs of eyes had met and the guilty secret had passed between them.

Lalita, their mother, had told Jawan then that if he wrote his father's name in the sand it would not be washed away, for Nagaraja had loved the sea, and in time Vishnu, the god of preservation, would reincarnate him. Jawan believed that he would return as he had been, but Kamara, who knew the ways of Vishnu, did not hope to meet his father in human guise.

Three days later the pearl had been stolen from their house—a pearl that Nagaraja had found in a shell of stunted growth and honeycombed with boring parasites, a pearl of flawless beauty, having the subdued, iridescent sheen which told of great value.

In a sudden gust of rage Kamara thrust his ironwood deep into the sand. It was Sayed Azad's turn to suffer.

During the months they could not dive, Kamara's hate had festered, waiting for the time when the opportunity for undetected murder beneath the sea once more arrived. Throughout those months Sayed Azad and Kamara had avoided each other, but both men knew that now the time was near for one to die.

Suddenly Jawan twisted round excitedly. " There is movement on the beach, the fires are being lit," he cried, rising.

Kamara motioned the boy back as their mother came out of the house with rice.

" You must eat to gain strength for work, and you should obey the head of our house," Lalita told Jawan fondly.

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Her sad face yet held a poignant beauty, and Kamara, watching her, was overcome with a strange loneliness. It was on him that the little family now relied.

"Our mother is right, Jawan. There is enough time and more to have our supper before we join the rest."

They ate silently, while from time to time dim figures from other dwellings passed quietly on their way to the beach.

At length when the meal was finished Lalita spoke. "Who among you dives at the firing of the gun?"

Kamara looked up from his bowl. "I shall dive first."

"Yes," cried Jawan in exultation, "Kamara dives first with Sayed Azad who is second only to him in fame, but I will go down with Sayed Azad's son, Mohammed, at the second plunge. And now may I go to the beach?"

He ran quickly to where the lights from many fires began to glow. Lalita went back into the house and, returning with a pitcher of water, offered it to Kamara.

She stood looking down at him for some moments until she said, "I am worried, Kamara, for these many months since your father died out there." With a graceful movement of her head she indicated the sea. "You have been thinking deep within yourself, and I hope you do not plan any evil intent. You do not believe it was the sharks that killed Nagaraja. All this I can feel, and also that you bear animosity towards Sayed Azad."

Kamara spat on the sand. "He is worthless and not of our faith. Moreover, mother, did you think it was the evil spirits who removed the pearl?"

"There are other pearls, Kamara, and not all come from the shells of oysters. Also the pearl was not ours and should first have been declared to the government. Sayed Azad, it is true, is a follower of Mohammed, and I have heard of dreadful massacres far away in our beloved land where Moslem has murdered Hindu, and Hindu has struck down Moslem. But remember, there is peace in our community, and your father was a gentle man who would have no desire for violence."

Kamara did not look up from his pitcher when Lalita placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Peace be in your heart, my son," she murmured softly, and re-entered the house.

Kamara remained alone for a long time. Gradually the half moon appeared, and the evening breeze stirred the lonely palm trees which stood like isolated sentinels against attack by sea.

The ceremony to launch the pearling season had begun. Along the beach the fires of brushwood burnt, illuminating the outlines

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of some fifty boats all ready to depart; the incantations of the shark-charmers rose mournfully above the sound of surf.

Kamara sighed and shuddered as the night air of March grew colder. Eventually he got up and, carrying his basket, weighted sinkline, and ironwood, he went to the water's edge where his boat half floated on the incoming tide at the end of the long line.

He searched in the boat for his enemy's gear, and when he found it he stowed his own beside it for he knew, if his plan were to succeed, he must claim a place near Sayed Azad and his son.

When he had finished his preparations he looked for Jawan on the beach, and as he made his way he exchanged occasional greetings with other divers. He came upon the boy at length, a lithe, ebullient figure darting from group to group and listening to the talk of past adventures.

"The middle of the night approaches, brother. It is time that we were ready." He returned to his boat with unhurried steps as Jawan ran ahead.

Soon the incantations reached a climax, and in the dim light of moon and flame the crews started to board; ten men to each vessel, except the one in the centre of the line, which had in addition the shark-charmer who was to attend the diving, and the starter with his gun.

The boats were launched, fifty sails were hoisted, and the fleet moved off towards the pearling-banks of Tinnevelly. The voices of the charmers left on shore, still intoning their dirge, drifted across the water; the fires grew smaller as the distance lengthened.

The sea was calm, and in Kamara's boat the men began to sing an ancient hymn; a hymn that asked the gods to grant a successful catch and begged for safety from the perils of the ocean. The voice of Jawan rose above the others; but in time all the voices faded away. Kamara, looking down, saw that his brother slept, and with his arm he made a cradle for the boy. Silent save for the rustle of water and the creak of masts, the fleet sailed on along the silver path made by the moon.

Kamara did not sleep. His mother's words returned to him. The gentle Nagaraja would not have counselled murder; but murder must be avenged, and by whom more fittingly than the victim's elder son? Not for nothing was he named Kamara, offspring of Siva, god of destruction, and Parvati, his consort. Besides, the Mohammedan's eyes had transmitted a message as clear as if it had been spoken: Sayed Azad intended to kill him, Kamara, so that no living man should have knowledge of Nagaraja's true end. He could feel the warmth of Jawan's body on one side of him; on the other sprawled Mohammed, Sayed Azad's son.

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All through the soft Indian night the pearling-fleet steered eastwards. By the time the banks were reached, the moon had set, and close to the horizon a late star twinkled palely. Blurred shapes of men began to stir. Kamara woke Jawan, who shivered as he returned from sleep. A finger of light spread across the water and Jawan handed his brother the basket, heavy with the weight of the sinkline, and the lethal ironwood.

"Do not forget," Kamara said, "two jerks on the signal cord indicate that I have filled the basket and you may draw it up. If there is a series of heavy pulls, I am in danger and you should haul in as fast as possible. But whatever happens do not pull unless I give a signal."

Jawan was trembling with excitement and did not answer.

Sayed Azad stood next to Kamara on the side of the boat. The faint dawn lit his greying hair, and he looked down at Jawan from evil, sullen eyes. The frightful scar on his right thigh, caused by battle with a shark, showed livid against his copper-coloured skin.

"Let us hope your inexperience will not jeopardize your brother, Jawan," he said. "Many years will have passed before you can outlast sixty seconds. You should learn from Mohammed who has fished but two seasons and yet can remain below for a full two minutes."

At the other's jeering tones a fresh outburst of hate shook Kamara, and he made a quick movement as if to pierce Sayed Azad then and there, but with a great effort he controlled himself. The time to kill approached, and the murder must be beneath the sea where there would be no witnesses.

Sayed Azad had observed the gesture, and the muscles on his arm swelled as he tightened his grip on his ironwood. Kamara wondered whether his enemy would attempt to strike during the first dive or wait till later in the day. Probably he would wait; in order to avoid the suspicion of those above he would not dare attack until his basket was at least partially filled with shells.

By the time that the fifty boats appeared, the finger of light had broadened, turning the pale horizon pink, and Kamara could feel the first warmth of the morning sun upon his back. From the sides of each boat five men prepared to jump. From the middle boat came the cries of the shark-charmers, beside Kamara an upright figure poised to fire the gun. The tranquil water sparkled in the glory of the dawn.

The crack of the gun came loud across the still air. Two hundred and fifty divers jumped.

When Kamara entered the cold, clear water he allowed the weight to carry him downwards, for he knew it was necessary to

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conserve his strength. He could imagine on the surface of the sea five splashes made by the divers from his boat, spreading till they merged with the ocean's ripples; in the boat five partners would be leaning over, their eyes plumbing the depths.

On his way down he saw Sayed Azad once, a ghostly figure descending with him. He passed a bevy of gaily coloured doctor-fish at play and graceful swaying plants that grew vertically. And then he reached the banks, all speckled with oyster shells and with the veins of plant roots running through the sand.

Laying the basket on the bed, he placed the weight inside to hold it down. Then he looked around. There was no sign of any other diver; his enemy no doubt intended to avoid him until the third or fourth dive. Sayed Azad was well aware of Kamara's powers of endurance and would wish to have the experience of previous dives, for he himself would be able to stay longer under water as the day progressed and his lungs became more accustomed to the strain.

Kamara was prepared to bide his time. Using his powerful toes, he swam about picking shells from the bottom, choosing only those of irregular shape and with excrescences, because they were the ones most likely to contain the pearls of value.

He had not long been at work when straight in front of him he discerned a slight movement. He saw it was a sting-ray with bitter mouth and bristled dorsal fin, and hostile eyes which rolled uneasily. Startled, Kamara stood upright. In doing so he felt a sudden pain as one foot caught on the sharp edge of an oyster shell. The sting-ray turned and disappeared without apparent effort, its poisoned tail stirring a lazy wisp of sand. Kamara looked down and in mild surprise saw his blood mixing with sand and sea. It was a minor cut yet bled profusely in the water.

Kamara returned to his fishing. As he worked his way along the bank he came upon the shape of Sayed Azad, busy some paces away. The Mohammedan's head turned continuously, ready to parry the expected attack, and when he saw Kamara he bared his lips like a jungle animal at bay.

Kamara moved out of his range and sought for shells elsewhere. By now it was too late in the dive to attempt the killing, since the cold had begun to numb and already a familiar pain assailed his ears. Presently it would be time to signify his finished task to Jawan in the boat. There would be other dives.

Suddenly, that subtle sense possessed by all experienced divers warned him of a dreadful presence.

He paused, tense and still.

Then, cautiously, he stood up and looked behind him. It was a shark. The long, blue-grey form hovered motionless.

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Kamara dared not try to gain the surface because every diver knew that such killers struck at climbing swimmers, for human legs made a more attractive target for their avaricious jaws. In attendance on the shark came two silver pilot-fish with black stripes; one, quite large, was underneath the parent belly, while the other, much smaller, kept station above the pointed snout.

Kamara gradually began to edge sideways towards his basket; he needed the weight to hold him effortlessly down. Sharks were thought to be half blind, and this one seemed intent on watching a point on the farther side of the basket. As his stealthy movement took him nearer his objective, Kamara picked out the faint outlines of Sayed Azad, still collecting shells.

Sayed Azad also sensed the danger, for Kamara saw the blossom of sand as he swung to face the foe. Sayed Azad had been working beside his basket, and in quick reaction to emergency grabbed his weight.

The shark showed no interest.

Slowly Kamara stretched out his hand and, groping in his basket, felt with relief the heavy stone.

With infinite caution Sayed Azad approached to seek protection in the other's presence. All thought of murder had left Kamara now. Together they hung above the oyster beds, holding their weights in one hand and ready with their ironwood in the other. The hair on Sayed Azad's head floated slowly up and down.

The shark stared placidly. Kamara wondered how it had been attracted so quickly to his blood, and marked the wicked triangular teeth rooted in the crescent mouth. With slight tremors of its pointed fins it started to circle out of reach. The divers turned within the circle, confronting always their common peril.

Kamara began to feel the lack of air. The shark continued on its endless circle. The pilot-fish swam above and below as though attached by some invisible bond. The divers went on turning, each one uncertain of the shark's intent and each one wondering whether he was to be the sacrifice.

The blood in Kamara's temples pounded, the cold of the all-embracing water chilled his bones. Soon, he knew, the pain would leave him and peace would come, then sublime assurance as if he were a god, then unconsciousness—and death.

Or would his awareness return when those terrible jaws grabbed him? Would there be a greater and more dreadful agony as his limbs were severed? Had Nagaraja suffered much when the unsuspected thrust had pierced his body?

Kamara could not survive much longer. Sayed Azad's strength was also ebbing. His chin and head pressed hard against his chest, and his stomach heaved for want of oxygen. His eyes

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were wild yet glassy, and his cheeks were drawn within his mouth.

Both men knew the first to yield would be the killer's choice. The shark moved closer. Sayed Azad jabbed despairingly with his ironwood. The shark turned as though to go, but a moment later it was back to recommence its remorseless round, the little, wide-set eyes watching with unblinking gaze. The pilot-fish were with their master still.

The divers went on turning.

There was a tentative pull on Kamara's sinkline. Jawan was anxious for his brother's safety. Kamara's tortured mind drifted to his family; if the shark took him, there would be but two in the little house above the beach and he doubted whether Jawan could keep starvation from their home.

The shark maintained its patient cycle. The divers went on turning.

Now Sayed Azad's knees and head were bent forward as the flame of his endurance flickered low. Kamara, too, had reached exhaustion. His senses began to drift away; the prismatic vision of the ocean grew blurred and faded. He must have air.

In desperation he prayed to the god of preservation: *Vishnu, I who have justly sought my father's revenge am now in mortal danger. Now, if ever, is the hour to grant survival to your servant.*

Suddenly the pilot-fish below the belly left the shark and swam straight towards Sayed Azad. Casting away his weight and ironwood Sayed Azad moved his hands quickly as if to ward it off and, collecting his remaining strength, he sprang to seek the air above. As his legs kicked out in frenzied endeavour, the shark attacked. In one smooth action, appalling in its grace, it turned on its back and snatched one crippled, kicking leg.

There was time to glimpse the horror on Sayed Azad's face, the contorted mouth opening to erupt a stream of bubbles, the hair flowing horizontally, the eyes starting out of the head with terror, and then the shark sped away, its victim in its jaws.

The sand swirled in eddies from the passage of their bodies.

The larger of the pilot-fish, the same that had shown the assassin to its prey, remained behind; and as Kamara thrust upwards to fill his bursting lungs, he felt it gently brush his cheek in that caressing motion Nagaraja had always used when teaching him to dive these many moons ago.

★ ★ ★

## *THE OLD FOCUS AT HOME*

*Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.*

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

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# Martian Eisteddfod

**Annoying it was losing our best harpist like that**

by E. L. MALPASS

THE Martians upset the practice for the Eisteddfod, proper. There we all were, in Mrs. Edwards's parlour, practising as hard as you please. There was old Myfanwy, plucking the harp strings so lovingly that it plucked your heart strings to see her, and Treacly Williams rendering *The Ash Grove* so beautiful the tears streamed down his plump cheeks.

And then, from outside, came a noise such as we had never heard before, so strange that it stopped the music dead.

One of the Male Voice Choir pulled aside an aspidistra leaf and peered through the window. "Something have landed in bull field," he said. "Flying saucer, could be."

Myfanwy's nutcracker jaws snapped open. "Well, whoever it is, they ought to know better," she said severely. "Dangerous to cut Treacly off in mid rendering like that. Killed Evan Evans stone-dead, it did, being cut off in the middle of *Why do the Nations?*—him tangled up in all those jiggling notes and the tent collapsing just as he was gathering his strength for *Imagine a Vain Thing*."

Dai Edwards came in from the kitchen. "Wireless chap says, 'Look out! Frost tonight, maybe,'" he announced. "Oh, and Martians have invaded London. Seized the Houses of Parliament, they have, by sheer weight of numbers. Terrible, isn't it?"

"Terrible," agreed Treacly Williams, spraying his throat.

"What do he say?" quavered old Myfanwy.

"Martians," Mrs. Edwards explained kindly. "Invaded London. You know, men from the planet with all the canals that Astrology Morgan tells about."

Old Myfanwy looked worried. Then she brightened up. "Laura's girl married a bargee," she said. "A Mr. Smithson. Nice fellow. Wore a bowler."

There was a scrabbling at the front door. Everyone looked a bit nervous. Dai Edwards swallowed. Then he went and opened the door.

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Two little men stood on the step. They were about two feet high, with sad, worried little faces. They peered up silently at Dai with anxious eyes.

Treacly Williams whistled. "Martians, for sure," he said.

Old Myfanwy looked at them scornfully. "Not much like Mr. Smithson," she said. "A big fleshy man, he was."

"Oh, the little dears. Missing the invasion they will be," cried Mrs. Edwards, wanting to fold the tiny creatures to her bosom.

One of the Martians spoke. His voice was muffled and tinny, like Auntie Mezzo-Soprano Jenkins's phonograph. "We wish to go to London." He looked as though he were going to cry.

Treacly Williams came to the rescue. "There is a bus to Dinas Junction in five minutes," he said. "But early it went tonight, as usual, ten minutes ago. Evans the Bus have a girl in Dinas," he explained.

The Martians looked baffled. They edged into the room, lost and bewildered, their big eyes gazing mournfully at the Male Voice Choir, and they jumped nervously when old Myfanwy called out, "Just because we have visitors is no reason for not doing our practice, is it?" She swept some angry chords.

Funny it was to see the Martians. At the first notes they lifted their heads like dogs that hear the carving-knife being sharpened. They located the sound, and then they ran together and stood, silent and spellbound, their unblinking eyes gazing fascinated at Myfanwy's flying fingers.

There they stood for forty-five minutes, without a sound, without a movement, entranced. And when at last Myfanwy stopped playing, one of them stepped timidly forward and put out his hand and shyly touched a string. The note strayed, plangent, about the room. The Martian gazed at his fellow, awestruck. Then, as one man, they fell upon the harp and plucked all the strings at once.

Dreadful the noise was. Frightened at what they had done, the little men ran across the room and cowered behind Mrs. Edwards.

Shame it was, but the practice broke up early that night, Treacly Williams—who is temperamental—saying that somehow *The Ash Grove* did not seem right with Martians in the room; and the little men were obviously so terrified by the *Anvil Chorus* that the Male Voice Choir stopped halfway through out of sheer pity.

Right the wireless chap had been about the frost. When Mrs. Edwards shut the door behind the Male Voice Choir and heard their boots ringing away down the frosty road, she looked at the

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Martians and she said, " Tonight's frost might nip the little dears. Tuck them up in the spare bed I will."

When she came down again, there was old Myfanwy still sitting by her harp, the firelight glinting on the strings and on the great gold frame and on Myfanwy's white wild hair.

" Bed now, Myfanwy," said Mrs. Edwards.

Without a word the old lady rose, her stiff black dress sweeping the strings as she passed, and a sweet jangle of notes danced with the firelight and crept out of doors and set off on the long journey to the stars and the ends of space.

Slowly the firelight died, and slowly the earth swung into the sunlight again, and morning came.

But in the morning the little men had gone. The flying saucer had gone.

And Myfanwy's harp had gone, too.

Bereaved and inconsolable the old lady was. " Mean, to take an old creature's harp," she complained. " Never would Mr. Smithson have done such a thing." And she slipped a couple of cartridges into Grandfather Edwards's shotgun, and went outside, and sat all day on an upturned bucket, the gun across her knees, gazing furiously at the empty sky.

In the evening the men came for the practice, and surprised they were to see Myfanwy sitting on her bucket. " Can't trust those Martians an inch, taking an old soul's harp," said Mrs. Edwards. " Lucky they didn't make off with my harmonium isn't it now? "

Dai came out. " Warm and muggy tomorrow, the chap says," he announced. " And invasion have been repulsed. Flying back to Mars, the invaders are."

At that moment there was the same unearthly noise that we had heard before, and a great flock of saucers passed over, flying high. Myfanwy blazed away with both barrels. The saucers did not even break formation.

" Missed," said Treacly.

But after a few seconds one saucer left the rest and spun gently down and landed in the bull field. Two little men climbed out lugging something behind them.

Myfanwy's harp!

They set it down before her. One of them pulled out what appeared to be a Martian-English phrase-book, and turned the pages. " Pray, madam, teach me to play the harp," he asked in his phonograph-like little voice.

Myfanwy ignored him. Eyes shining, she pulled the harp against her cheek and drew loving fingers across the strings

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You could tell the old magic had returned for the Martians. Tiny tears of joy rolled down their wrinkled faces. They watched carefully.

Then, more confident now, they advanced on the harp. They plucked the strings like mad. Frightened by the noise, bitterly disappointed by their failure, they stopped and retreated.

Thoughtfully, they looked at Myfanwy. Thoughtfully, they looked at each other.

They nodded.

Strong as lions they were. One picked up the harp. The other picked up Myfanwy.

Before anyone knew what was happening, they were all in the flying saucer, and the hatches were closed. We watched the vessel climbing and spinning into the setting sun and out among the unlit stars.

Treacly Williams spoke for us all.

"Who is there will harp for us at the Eisteddfod now?" he asked miserably.

No one said anything. Twenty faces gazed into the sunset, perplexed, defeated.

Yes, annoying it was, losing our best harpist like that. But nice, after all, to think of her playing up there, while the little men gather round, silent and sad, and the evening mists creep up from the canals.

Come to think of it, the old lady may even organize a Martian Eisteddfod, during the long winter nights.

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# MISS HERCULES

**"I'm not made for love," she said**

by PAUL GALLICO

MR. Joseph Ashmendole, formerly of the United States Navy, emerged from the cloakroom of the Persian Patio of the palatial new Las Vegas hotel, The Corral, where he had been on important official and emergency business, and nodded to Franz Hofmeister, the Swiss manager.

"O.K.," he said. "It's working all right now."

Then he handed his heavy sack of essential instruments to his assistant to take home, stopped at the outdoor bar for a quick one on the rocks, and lost his heart.

The hundred-thousand-dollar floor-show, provided by Poke Barlow, tough gambler-proprietor of Nevada's most fabulous show-place, was on. A blonde girl, six feet tall, but beautifully proportioned, stood in the spotlight's milky pool, in an abbreviated costume. She had eyes the colour of forget-me-nots, peach-blow skin, and was reciting some doggerel in a pleasant voice:

*My strength is as the strength of ten,*
*But that's no help when wooing men.*
*I'm twenty-one and never kissed,*
*When I hold hands, I sprain your wrist.*
*No wedding bells for me, alack,*
*I hugged my man and broke his back.*

The placard on the three-legged stand near the orchestra, reminiscent of the old days of vaudeville, announced MARYLINNE MERRILEW—*The Strongest Girl in the World.* Joe Ashmendole thought that never in his life had he seen so beautiful and desirable a person.

"And now," announced Miss Merrilew, "may I ask four gentlemen from the audience to come out here to act as jury?" And then as no one came forward, she added pityingly, "I won't hurt you. Who'll be the first?"

Joseph Ashmendole, five foot nine, but muscled like a middleweight champion, one-time ship-fitter aboard the U.S. Battlewagon *Nevada*, put down his drink and, moving slowly, like

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someone in the grip of something stronger than himself, walked out onto the floor to be greeted with a birdlike cry of delight from the statuesque girl: "Ah, here's a gentleman. Thank you, sir. Sit right there. Now three more, please. Don't be shy."

A moment later the jury was filled. To each, the performer gave a tenpenny nail. "Everybody knows the female is weaker though she may be deadlier," she gagged. "So just examine those nails and see if perhaps you think you could break one in half."

The four men, twisting like schoolboys on their chairs, fiddled with the nails. Besides Ashmendole, there were a cowpuncher, a Hollywood director, and a polo-playing Argentine millionaire. Joe examined the article professionally. There was no hanky-panky about it. You couldn't do a four-year hitch in the Navy as pipe-fitter and then another four as the leading plumber of Las Vegas and not know metal. He found it impossible, almost, to bend, much less break, between his fingers.

"Great, big, strong he-men," said Marylinne Merrilew, and, taking a nail from the table on which her props rested, she wrapped it in a dainty lace-handkerchief, manipulated it two or three times, and then presented it, broken neatly in half, to the audience who rewarded her with delighted laughter and roars of applause. Joe marvelled. Her lovely form, the smooth round arms, feminine back and shoulders showed not a single muscle-bulge. Yet she had done it before his eyes.

It was the same with the rest of the act. With scornful chatter about the comparative strength of men and women, she presented a half-inch iron bar for inspection; then, taking it in her teeth, bent it with a single flowing movement into the shape of a hairpin.

Finally she gave them copies of the enormous Manhattan telephone directory, and after they had fumbled with them, proceeded to rip one in half, after saying with even more scorn, "What! can't tear a bit of paper?"

The girl had big hands, but she never made an ungraceful movement as she tugged and wrenched at the book, and Joe Ashmendole thought his heart would break from love and pity as she bent her head and two locks of gold-blonde hair fell down over her eyes.

Then, in a kind of ecstatic climax, she straightened up, and like some Greek war goddess, lifted the broken volume above her head, and tore it in two.

The band greeted the accomplishment with a fanfare. The Master of Ceremonies came out and stole half the girl's bows.

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The jury retired. The audience of playboys and playgirls, sophisticates, rustics, actors, actresses, producers, divorcers, and gamblers stood and applauded.

It took Joe Ashmendole ten minutes to work up the courage to inquire his way round to Miss Merrilew's dressing-room. When he got there he found he had been preceded by the Hollywood director, the polo-player, and the dude-ranch cowpuncher. The girl, magnificent in a Chinese dressing-gown, was holding a kind of hard-boiled court. She was no stranger to attempts to acquire her unique person.

She had already received three propositions, none of which sounded enticing. The director had a ranch house in the hills, complete with etchings, the Argentine wanted her to stay up all night gambling, and the cowpuncher wished her to mount a horse and ride somewhere with him into the great beyond.

Silence fell upon the entry of Joe Ashmendole and the men all gazed at him, not that he was much to look at, compared with them, with his slight frame, pinkish hair, freckled skin, and friendly eyes. They were trying to stare him out since they did not know him and he was obviously no one of importance.

Joe said, " I just came to tell you how much I enjoyed your performance, Miss Merrilew. I thought you were terrific," and then added, " I'm sorry, I didn't know you were busy."

The girl looked at him coldly. " Thank you," she said. " And what if I weren't busy? " She was curious as to what the fourth proposition might be.

Joe reflected. It seemed to him that after her exertions on the night-club floor a girl, even if she was a goddess, ought to be hungry. He knew that, after wrestling for an hour with a defective U-pipe connected with the cloakroom plumbing, he was. It was one o'clock in the morning.

He said, " Well, Miss, I was going to ask you to ride down to Chinaman Sam's with me and join me in a Nevada sandwich."

Miss Merrilew sat up. " Oh! What is a Nevada sandwich? "

Joe explained. " It's something kind of special that Chinaman Sam whips up, Miss. He toasts a slab of bread with a little garlic and butter, throws a slice of barbecued pork on it with some soy sauce and one of them egg things, which is like a Western fried egg, only it's got onion, celery, and shrimp in it. Then he puts in chicken, and Swiss cheese with some cole slaw, a piece of ham and boloney with chili, a slice of raw onion, dill pickle, and sweet chow-chow with crisp bacon and mayonnaise, and tops it off with a kind of Mexican tortilla with sour cream on it.

" It's mighty satisfying after you've been working."

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The girl made a decisive gesture. "That sounds jolly good to me. If you'll wait outside I shan't be a moment. Excuse me, won't you, gentlemen, but the Nevada sandwich wins."

She raised her eyebrows at Joe Ashmendole's cream-and-crimson finback Super-Zenith, and her look and her wariness seemed to say, "Careful—another playboy . . ."

She had no way of knowing that Joe's turn in the Navy had trained him to run one of the most lucrative professions in the country. Furthermore, being British, she did not realize that she was now in a nation where wealth was gauged no longer by the make of car one drove, but by the number of them that one had, a five-Zenith man socially outranking a four, and so on down to the rank and file who owned only one.

The Nevada sandwich at Chinaman Sam's lived up to its reputation, and they both ate ravenously, topping it off with beer. Joe ventured, "You're English, aren't you?"

"Coo," said the Strong Girl, "how did you guess?" She was hard. Hard and hurt.

Joe took no offence. He was too happy merely to be in the presence. "I had a few months at 20 Grosvenor Square in London, during the war," he explained. "I like the English."

It gave them something in common and helped to break the ice. Marylinne came from Clapton, north of Bethnal Green. She did not explain further about herself, how she had grown too tall for love and her fiancé had let himself be persuaded to throw her over so that he would not be laughed at for marrying a big horse. And how, as though to mock herself for ever after, she had taken the fifty pounds she had saved up working as a waitress, and had bought the act of a strong man from the Knie Circus who needed the money for drink, and, adding her own charm to it, had become successful and well off.

When they had finished eating, Joe said, "Gee, Miss Merrilew, I know it's awfully late, but I wonder if you'd let me show you Boulder Dam by moonlight. It's only twenty-three miles from here. It's the most wonderful sight in the world."

The girl said, "Well, that's a new approach, all right."

"It'll be an experience you won't forget."

Marylinne said, "I don't doubt it." Then she made up her mind. "Right oh! A girl ought to try everything at least once."

The finback purred the twenty-three miles in nineteen minutes, and there was no talking, for Joe concentrated on his driving over the arrow-straight road. Then they climbed for ten minutes up a winding mountain road, turned one more corner, and parked at a broad-walled ledge

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Beneath them, shining in the light of a high-riding three-quarter moon, lay the glassy sheet of the pent-up water, the massive, breathtaking wall of the dam, the glistening spillway, and the silvery thread of the Colorado River a thousand feet below.

The girl sat on the stone wall, regarding the scene silently, the moon turning her hair silver too, and darkening the blue of her eyes to heliotrope. " Do you like it? " Joe asked.

She shrugged and replied, " Not too bad."

If Joe felt any disappointment at her failure to enthuse, he suppressed it for the joy of having her with him. " Do you know," he said, " in a way, you're like that."

" Is that supposed to be a compliment? "

" I mean, so perfect," Joe explained, and then added, " May I ask you something? "

The girl shifted and sighed. " Yes, I know. Is Marylinne Merrilew my real name? Well, it isn't. It's Daisy Wills."

" Oh," exclaimed Joe, startled, " how did you know? "

" They all ask. Next they want to know how I can bend iron bars and tear up telephone books—"

" That's what I was going to ask next," Joe admitted. " I never saw anything like it."

Daisy looked up into the night sky and repeated by rote, " It's concentration. I summon all my energies to the moment. It leaves me exhausted afterwards."

" Gee," said Joe Ashmendole, " you poor kid."

There was so much love and sympathy in his voice that, for a fleeting instant, Daisy wished she had told him the truth instead of the usual hocus-pocus reserved to fob off the ever-inquisitive layman, poking his nose into the secrets of show business. For there is a knack to this strong man business, which will not be exposed here since the art is still practised by a number of honest and worthy people who make a respectable living out of it.

However, the moment for such a revelation had passed as Joe said, " Gosh, Miss Wills, you'd better get some rest. I'm a louse to be keeping you up. I'll get you back real fast . . ."

On the straight, the finback did a nice hundred-and-five all the way, and a half-hour later, Miss Marylinne Merrilew, née Daisy Wills, was brushing her teeth and combing her hair in her room at The Corral and remembering that this odd pink-haired chap who said he was a plumber but owned the most expensive car in America had not even held her hand, much less tried to kiss her.

A week later, Joe Ashmendole proposed and was refused. A

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visit to Chinaman Sam's for a Nevada and a beer in the cream-and-crimson car with Joe had become routine after her performance. Sunday night, she had asked to be taken out to Boulder Dam again, much to Joe's surprise. The moon, now full, bathed the awesome sight. Lost in contemplation of the fabulous magnitude of the work, Daisy murmured, "Oh . . . it *is* beautiful. I shall never forget it."

Her appreciation broke Joe's shyness and restraint. He took her hand quietly, and said, "You know I'm in love with you, don't you, Daisy?"

She snatched her hand away and turned on him. "Pooh! That's what all the men say when they want to make you."

Talk of love, ever since her broken engagement, had a curious effect upon Daisy Wills. It made her angry. A broken heart is never quite as good as one that has not been damaged. That was the thing about a heart with a crack in it: the word "love" made it hurt all over again.

She wished she had never started going to Chinaman Sam's with Joe Ashmendole. He was so kind and gentle. With the others, at least one knew where one was, and could brush, laugh, or push them off, or in extreme cases use ju-jutsu, at which she was an adept.

Joe said, "But I don't want to make you, Daisy. I want to marry you. Once in a lifetime a man sees and knows the girl he wants—and needs."

Daisy said, "I don't doubt it." There were two kinds of men who wanted to marry her. Those who saw an easy living in the proceeds of her work, and those who were weak and wanted a big woman to mother them. She placed Joe in the latter category. "I'm doing all right. What would I want to get married for?"

"For love—and to have kids maybe and a home—and somebody around who cared about you."

"I don't believe in love. I don't believe there is a man who could make me love him."

Joe said, "You don't think very much of men, do you, Daisy?" He was filled with sadness at her hardness and yet he had a moment of intuition that comes sometimes to real lovers. He had a glimpse of the pain beneath the crust, and something small and helpless fluttering there.

"No," Daisy replied bluntly. "They are either thieves or weaklings."

"But if somehow I could prove to you that I was neither . . . ?" Joe said.

"You couldn't." And then in a moment of kindness she added, "Don't try, Joe. I'm afraid I'm a pretty tough customer.

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I'm not made for love.. Forget it. But I'll always be grateful to you for showing me—this." And with her arm she swept the scene below them.

" Men made it," Joe said, a little bitterly.

" With machines," Daisy concluded.

It was two nights later in the Persian Patio. The silver spotlight focused on the night-club floor, the statuesque, beautiful girl in black tights and velvet bodice, and the jury of four squirming on their chairs.

Besides the usual lantern-jawed, ham-handed cowpuncher, there was a half-lit Texas oil millionaire on a binge and another wealthy polo-player, this time from Brazil. The fourth member was Joe Ashmendole wearing a nicely cut dinner-jacket with a red carnation in his buttonhole. Daisy had had no misgivings when he had again been the first to respond to her call for stooges, but she might have had if she had noticed the grim expression around his mouth.

The boys were fiddling with their tenpenny nails; Daisy had her back to them and was doing her patter and kidding the men by the microphone. Joe Ashmendole took a deep breath. The strongest girl in the world turned to her jury to collect her nails.

Only a genuine trouper would have survived the shock when Joe Ashmendole, who sat at the far end, dropped the two halves of his nail into her hand and looked her squarely in the eye. Without a break in her rhythm, she palmed the two pieces, holding up the other ones intact. Unobtrusively, she dropped the broken one onto her props table, took up her little lace handkerchief, and went into her nail-breaking routine.

But Joe Ashmendole was aware that her voice shook slightly as she said, " Great, big, strong he-men . . ."

She was noticeably wary when she distributed the iron bars for testing. The affair of the nails had obviously been some kind of accident, probably a defective nail, but she could not afford to take chances, and for safety's sake thought it best to keep Joe Ashmendole covered from as much of her audience as possible by standing in front of him while she continued her act.

When she turned to collect the iron bars, she turned pale, for she saw Joe waiting for her with his bent into the shape of a U-pipe. This time he did not look her in the eye. The audience was laughing, buzzing, and pointing at Joe. The excitement and tension of the unusual had communicated itself to the crowd.

There was no way of concealing the bar, but as she took it from him she hissed at him, " Thief! " She was torn between rage and hurt. The first man she had cared for had proved a

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weakling. The second was stealing her act from under her nose and making a fool of her. She collected the others and bent her bar, but the effect wasn't the same.

However, she was ready for him at the finale. She distributed her telephone directories to the oil millionaire, the cowpuncher, and the Brazilian, but ignored Joe, and then, returning to her microphone, went into her patter with more confidence. "The Telephone Company has offered me a contract to tear up their old telephone books . . ."

The laughter that swept over the night club was out of all proportion to the mild titter that usually greeted this sally. With a sinking feeling, Daisy Wills, alias Marylinne Merrilew, turned round just in time to catch Joe Ashmendole in his life-and-death struggle with one of the thick volumes.

He had simply leaned over to the rather bored Brazilian who had finished his inspection, and said, "Mind if I look at that a moment, brother?" And the next moment the battle was on.

The veins stood out on his forehead; his eyes threatened to pop from his head. The sweat ran down his brow and cheeks; his neck, ears, and face grew crimson.

Cries came from the males in the audience: "Go it, kid, you can do it!" "Show her what you can do, son!" "Are we men or are we mice?"

Sounds, too, began to emanate from the tortured mouth of Joe Ashmendole. "Cissies, eh? No respect for men, eh? Can't bust a nail or tear up a little telephone book . . . If I can just get the doggone thing started, I'll show her . . ."

To Daisy, standing there transfixed, helpless, and miserable at such treachery, it was obvious that Joe was approaching some kind of crisis, for he turned from red to deep purple with effort and concentration.

Then there was a cracking noise as the edges of the volume gave, followed by a ripping, tearing crescendo, and Joe Ashmendole stood there looking down, unbelieving, at the two halves of the telephone book in either hand while the huge night club rocked with cheers.

But Daisy Wills of Clapton, north of Bethnal Green, burst into tears at the ruination of the best trick in her act, and ran from the floor.

Simultaneously, two big men, with outstanding ears and huge hairy hands, wearing ill-fitting dinner-jackets, appeared on either side of Joe Ashmendole and took him firmly by the arms.

"O.K., strong boy," one of them said, "the boss wants to have a little chat with you. And don't give any trouble because you ain't that strong . . ." And they walked him off the floor.

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In his office, Poke Barlow, immaculate in dinner-jacket, stared at Joe out of his oddly shaped eyes that were square at the corners. His gambler's trap-mouth opened slightly and he said, "You broke up one of my acts and made the little lady cry. Do you think I pay thousands of dollars to bring an act here from London to be made a monkey of by some wise guy trying to get hisself some publicity? I don't know what your racket is, feller, but after my boys get through with you, you're going to find it harder to work it with a couple of broken arms."

Joe braced himself for battle, but said, "Listen, Poke, I was only . . ."

The door opened and Franz Hofmeister came in. He said, "Ah, there you are, Mr. Ashmendole. I guess the boss has told you about the trouble with the shower in his private . . ."

Poke looked surprised. He jerked with his head for the manager to come over. "You know this monkey? Who is he?"

Hofmeister leaned over and whispered to some length that while Poke knew the celebrities who came to his hotel and the big names, he, Hofmeister, dealt with the people who really mattered in Las Vegas—plumbers, electricians, tradesmen, the citizens who kept the place going . . .

The thin line of Barlow's mouth parted once more. He said, "O.K., O.K., Mr. Ashmendole. The boys and I were only kidding. We didn't know who you were. Maybe you could take a look at that shower now. When I turn on the cold tap, the hot water comes."

The door opened again, this time with considerable violence, admitting Daisy Wills, still in costume, her face tear-stained, but her wonderfully blue eyes filled with fire. "What's going on here?" she cried. "What are you doing? One of the electricians said Joe was going to get hurt . . ." She stopped and stared for a moment, and the others in the room followed her gaze to two bloodstains on the floor where Joe was standing.

"Oh!" she screamed, "you brutes! you've tortured him," and moved.

The first guard, from force of habit, made the mistake of reaching for his shoulder holster. The next moment he was diving towards the floor where, upon arriving, he spun six or seven times like an exhibition ice skater and came to rest with one foot behind his ear. The second guard appeared to be seized with a mad notion to run across the room and hurl himself through the closed window, but this was not the true state of affairs for the impetus had been supplied by Daisy.

A moment later, Barlow began to rise like a helicopter from behind his desk seemingly determined to nest in his cut-glass

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chandelier, when Joe Ashmendole called a halt to the carnage. "Daisy! Cut it out. Stop it! Do you hear?"

She let go and Poke Barlow subsided, rubbing his elbow. Daisy said, "But, Joe, I was only trying to protect you."

The boy said sharply, "Look, kid, I'm capable of doing my own protecting—and yours, too."

Poke Barlow spoke bitterly. "Lady, if you think we'd harm a hair on the head of the best plumber in Las—"

Daisy said, "But he's bleeding—Joe, what has happened? Let me see your hands," for Ashmendole had suddenly hidden them behind his back.

He produced them sheepishly. "Aw, now, Daisy, nobody did anything to me. It isn't anything. I mean, they're just not used to . . ." They were a mass of metal tears, lacerations, and burst blisters.

She took them in hers with a queer tenderness for one so large, examined them, and then searched the young man's face. "Joe—that happened out there tonight? Then you're not really a thief and a professional trying to steal and ruin my act?"

Joe stared at her. "A what? Look, I told you I'd prove to you that I wasn't a weakling."

"Joe, you must tell me—how did you do it?"

He looked surprised at her question and then bashful, but since the remaining company, consisting of Barlow and Hofmeister, showed no signs of departing and, on the contrary, were listening, fascinated, he replied, "I just did what you said—concentrated everything on that one moment—and then I did it."

"But—but Joe," Daisy said with a queer kind of a shudder, "don't you see, that's impossible? I lied to you. That was just the line I give all the boys when they pester me about how I can do those tricks. There's a knack to it, and unless you know it . . ."

It was Joe's turn to look startled and turn a little pale. He glanced down at his hands once more and said finally, "I guess when you're in love you can do anything if you have to. I had to make you respect me. I said I'd prove I loved you, Daisy. Do you believe me now?"

Daisy started to cry again. "Oh Joe!" she said, and suddenly looked as small and miserable as a little girl.

He went over to her and stood there for a moment looking at her. "You're not really tough and hard, Daisy Wills," he said. "But I am, and I'm taking over. You're soft inside, and hurt like a kid. That's why you had to be a strong woman. O.K. The act is over. I've torn up your last telephone book. Do you hear?"

She stood there like a child, with the tears streaming down her face, and said, "Yes, Joe."

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And here Joe Ashmendole achieved the final miracle, for a clinch would have made them look ridiculous. Instead, he picked her up in his arms like an infant, and when her lovely head was pillowed on his shoulder, her size was as nothing.

" That's a good girl," he said, and headed for the door.

" Lissen," said Poke Barlow, " what about my shower? "

Joe Ashmendole paused at the door. " Not now, Poke. Later. I'll send one of my boys. Good night, all." And he went out with his prize.

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## *OYSTER BED*

In the dim recesses of an overstuffed second-hand shop my husband and I saw a headboard towering above the bric-a-brac like some Blakean torment. It was of ebony, massive cherubs entwined its posts—this was the top, the rest was hidden in the cellar—I demurred nervously but Harry was so enraptured that I let him and the dealer have their way. It was to be assembled and put together by a neighbouring carpenter and be delivered and set up the next afternoon, ready for our first night in our new home.

. . . When finally we went out with friends to eat oysters at eight the bedstead itself had not materialized. Fortified with oysters we came back two hours later . . . All was dark and quite still, but on opening the unfamiliar door to our new room and switching on the light, Harry and I clung to each other in sudden panic. There in the centre of our rose and grey *chambre*, which had looked fresh and spacious until then, reared one of the most horrifying monstrosities I have ever beheld, a four-poster as large as a tumbril. From each post winked and smirked the most hideous imps of hell, not cherubs at all; the fruit seemed to burst with poison, the peacocks' tails reached out like tentacles. I fled from the room and Harry quickly shut the door and locked it firmly from the outside.

" Will it walk," I whispered, for I was frightened.

Trembling, we stole hand in hand to the library above and there, on the familiar bosom of an old pink sofa, we clung together until dawn. As soon as dawn showed, we bribed the carpenter back again to undo his dreadful work. At daybreak, we carried the monstrous frame through the deserted streets to the edge of the Seine and from the Pont Neuf we let each hideous cherub plunge beneath the flood and gurgle away into oblivion. I swear the last one thumbed his nose as he went under.

CARESSE CROSBY, *The Passionate Years*

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**A rolling eye, a roving heart**

*'Tis she who nightly strowls with saunt'ring pace,*
*No stubborn stays her yielding shape embrace;*
*Beneath the lamp her tawdry ribbons glare,*
*The new-scower'd manteau, and the slattern air;*
*High-draggled petticoats her travels show,*
*And hollow cheeks with artful blushes glow;*
*With flatt'ring sounds she sooths the cred'lous ear,*
*My noble captain! charmer! love! my dear! . . .*
*She darts from sarsnet ambush wily leers,*
*Twitches thy sleeve, or with familiar airs*
*Her fan will pat thy cheek; these snares disdain,*
*Nor gaze behind thee, when she turns again.*

JOHN GAY, *Trivia; or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London*

## *In the Bag*

In Monterrey the serenatas are held in the Zaragoza Plaza on Sunday evenings . . . The boys and young men stroll carelessly round and round the plaza, while the girls, in little clutches of three or four, walk in the opposite direction. This brings them abreast of each other, so that looks may be exchanged . . .

When Bob had nothing better to do, he went to the serenatas, just for laughs.

One night, for the fun of it, he joined the boys going round and round, his cigar in his mouth, his hands in his pockets. And he came abreast of Beatriz. He has never been the same since . . .

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He stumbled round and round the plaza, absolutely bewitched, like all the others.

I was chatting in the patio with Mamacita when he came home. "They got me, pal," confided Roberto to me. "They waited until they saw the whites of my eyes, and then they let me have it with both barrels. I'm a dead duck."

He lurched towards his room. "He is in love," remarked Mamacita. "Pobrecito (Poor thing)."

ELIZABETH BORTON DE TREVIÑO

## *On the Brink*

*Dulcinea sallies forth to the fountain,*
*Her round slippery heels spring out*
*When she stretches across the basin*
*Her pitcher to the water-spout.*

*Then, placing her jar on the margin*
*She teazes her hair with her fingers,*
*Half aware of Sancho watching*
*In the gum trees how she lingers . . .*

*Lured by the lines of her beauty,*
*In fringes and taffeta wound,*
*Naked curves coming out of the shadows,*
*He cautiously measures the ground.*

*Bouncing quietly over the warm sand,*
*Like Falstaff, thirsty and lissom,*
*He kisses the buds in her black eyes,*
*Peeps furtively into her bosom.*

*While his venerable master fidgets*
*With a battered casque on his knees,*
*Bemoaning distresses of maidens*
*In the clump of eucalyptus trees.*

WILLIAM EDWIN COLLIN, *Sancho*

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## *Sleeping Partners*

. . . The Tuareg split into small groups and held an *ahal*. The women seemed to know how to make themselves astonishingly seductive on these occasions, and the technique they employed to reduce the men to the desired state of frenzy quite took one's breath away—the caressing voice, the melting looks, the alternate advances and withdrawals.

After a while the atmosphere in the tent began to seem very sultry, the *imzads* lay silent, and the couples were oblivious of anyone but each other as they sat there pressing their burning faces together and rubbing cheeks and noses, which is their way of kissing. Then one after another the women began to slip away quietly to their tents, and in a daze their lovers would stagger out after them.

The singing and dancing went on most of the night. Towards morning it at last grew quiet as the exhausted revellers sought a few hours' sleep. When the sun rose and the *marabout* summoned the faithful to prayer I noticed there were not many to answer the call.

PETER FUCHS, *The Land of Veiled Men*

## *Undone!*

*Too late for alarm! Exotic charm*
*Has caught in his gills like a gaff,*
*He goes to his fate with a hypnotized gait,*
*The slave of her silvery laugh,*

*And follows her in to her suite of sin,*
*Her self-contained bower of bliss,*
*They enter her flat, she takes his hat,*
*And he hastens to take a kiss.*

*Ah, if only he knew that concealed from view*
*Behind a "folk-weave" curtain*
*Is her fancy man, called Dublin Dan,*
*His manner would be less certain,*

*Of the old technique one need scarcely speak,*
*But oh, in the quest for Romance*
*'Tis folly abounding in a strange surrounding*
*To be divorced from one's pants.*

WILLIAM PLOMER, *French Lisette: A Ballad of Maida Vale*

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# DANGER TRAIL

**"I have killed many men, senor but never a woman"**

## by RICHARD FERBER

HE stopped on the rise of ground and looked back, but he could see no dust and no sign of the Apaches. Below him the road curved through the narrow canyon, and far off the dust rose from the travelling coach. He started down the slope, walking on the outsides of his boots and slipping frequently on the flinty stone. He was too tired now to check his descent much. And his feet hurt. Por Dios, how his feet hurt! He smiled a little. He was lucky. After all, the Apaches had killed only his horse. They had left him his feet, and on those feet he could move, painful though it was.

He stopped at the edge of the road and leaned on the Winchester rifle. The dust cloud was growing in the distance, hardly distinct against the red-dust walls of the canyon. He tilted his hat back to cool his head. The hat was a wide-brimmed Stetson with a buckskin lace running round the crown and dropping through two holes to tie round his chin.

Under it, his hair was coarse and black and wavy. The moustache across his upper lip was black, too, though it was greyish now with dust. His face was long and angular and darkened more with natural colour than by the workings of the wind and sun. His body was lean and hard-muscled, and he wore tight-fitting trousers and a waistcoat that had once been elaborately embroidered. That was before he had scraped it this last time across the rocks of Apacheria.

The stage came in sight, and he lifted the rifle and worked the Colt loose in the holster. Then he stepped into the road and threw up his hand. He recognized the driver; Bolts braced himself back on the seat and sawed violently at the reins. The messenger fumbled for the shotgun and peered, wild-eyed.

The coach came to a halt a few feet away, and the horses stamped and fidgeted and kicked up the dust around him. He tried to spit it out of his mouth and walked closer to the driver's seat. The old man, Bolts, was watching him without concern, but the messenger had swung the shotgun so that he could see

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the two dark holes of the muzzle. He smiled broadly and felt the caked dust crack at the corners of his mouth.

The old man said curiously, "El Ladino, you afoot?"

"Sí," Ramón answered. "The Chiracahuas, at this time of the year, they are unfriendly." He kept the rifle in his left hand and ignored the messenger's shotgun. He went on, "It's good to see you again, Señor Bolts. Especially at this time."

The old man scowled and made a jerking motion with his head that Ramón didn't understand. He started to lift the reins and Ramón reached up and caught them. He eyed Bolts questioningly. The old man glanced at the messenger and tried to push the shotgun aside, but the messenger held fast. The door on the other side opened, and boots scuffled in the dust.

Ramón cocked his head, listening, and his mouth tightened into a hard, impassive line. He started to bring up the Colt and saw the messenger's face. The man's finger was tight on the trigger of the shotgun. He could kill the messenger, that would be easy, but he cursed suddenly aloud. He saw what Bolts meant now by that crazy jerking of the head, and he let the gun fall back into the holster. He smiled and then shrugged as Jeb DeRain stepped clear of the coach and held his gun steadily on him.

There was someone else behind DeRain, a boy, Ramón saw; like DeRain he was wearing a star on his waistcoat. He stepped free of DeRain and spread his legs, and the sunlight flashed brightly on the two shiny Colts.

DeRain came forward in a half crouch and stopped a few feet away. "Don't move, breed," he said warily. "Don't move." He spoke to the boy without turning his head. "Get his gun, Basset." The lad holstered the Colts and moved round so that he came up on Ramón from behind. Still smiling, Ramón glanced at Bolts.

"I tried to tell you," the old man mumbled. He pulled a pint of whisky from his pocket and drank a third of it. He held it down to Ramón.

"I could use water," Ramón said pleasantly.

"Don't move," DeRain said again. The boy had lifted the gun from Ramón's holster and had taken the Winchester. DeRain straightened up and let his body relax. He became more self-assured, and hooked a thumb in the pocket of his waistcoat. "It's been a long time, breed," he said. He had difficulty keeping the naked pride from his voice.

"Sí," Ramón answered him simply. He wouldn't give the man the benefit of "señor." And it had been a long time. Six

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or seven years, he guessed. It had taken that long for DeRain to catch him, and the man had made a fool of himself many times in between. He remembered DeRain best for his red face, and perhaps his face would be red again. He said, "And now that you have me?"

DeRain smiled meaningfully. He was large-faced and the flesh hung loosely from his jowls. Sweat rolled off his forehead and his nose was shiny with the grease that had seeped out. He holstered the gun, and his fingers played with the gold chain of his watch. He spoke with assumed thoughtfulness, addressing the deputy. "It's sixty miles back to Chauncey. We'll go on to Leaderville. It's only thirty, and there's a good gaol there."

Bolts had lowered the water-bag by the strap. Ramón took it and drank, swishing the water around in his mouth. He spat it out and looked up at the sheriff. "I was going to tell the señor here—" he waved a hand at Bolts—"the Chiracahuas are out. I saw many burnt rancheros. They chased me far. It is not safe to go on."

DeRain laughed. "Sure. And you figure if we go back to Chauncey you got just that much more chance of slippin' away. Only not this time, breed. I'm gonna see you behind-bars, and I'm gonna see you to the gallows."

Ramón drank again from the water-bag. "The gaol is the same in Chauncey as it is in Leaderville. Everywhere the gaols are the same."

"We're going on," DeRain said stubbornly. He motioned Ramón towards the door of the coach.

"He may be right," Bolts spoke up from the seat. "I heard talk, Sheriff. Not much, but if the breed says it, you ought to listen."

DeRain stared at him angrily. He moved his glance to the other men and then back to the driver. "You interferin' with the law, Bolts?"

The old man met his eyes for only a moment. "Hell, no," he said disgustedly. He looked away and began screwing the cap on the bottle.

DeRain wouldn't let it go. He was thin-skinned and easily stirred by opposition. His voice rose to near a shout.

"You keep your opinion to yourself, Bolts. This man's goin' to Leaderville." He let his eyes drop, and he said more softly, "I'm not takin' any chances."

"Cuan estúpido eres!" Ramón said.

"Don't talk that Mex to me," DeRain shouted. His face reddened with anger and his eyes grew wide.

Ramón's shoulders rose and dropped. He smiled thinly.

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"I do not care about the Apaches. Among them, sometimes, I have friends. Perhaps I shall find one on the way to Leaderville."

DeRain choked back his rage. "Get in the coach," he said. He took out the gun again and pointed it at Ramón. Ramón moved to the coach and opened the door. He started to get in and saw the woman and stepped back to the ground.

He took off his hat and nodded and looked again. The woman was young. Her face was white and drawn, and there was a redness about her eyes. She carried something in her arms, wrapped in a light blue blanket, and Ramón saw it was a child. He smiled warmly and said, "Poquito," almost under his breath, and then turned suddenly back to DeRain, his eyes narrowing.

"A woman and a child," he said softly.

DeRain waved the gun at him. "Get in," he told him roughly.

"Wait," Ramón said. He put up a hand to stop the man's threatening advance, and his eyes darkened accusingly. "I have killed many men, señor. I have never killed a woman and a child."

"Who's talkin' about killin' them?" DeRain said impatiently.

"The Apaches," Ramón said, "you are forgetting the Apaches."

DeRain hesitated. For a moment the doubt showed on his face and he seemed to be undergoing a great struggle. He looked down the road in the direction of Leaderville. Then he turned and gazed for a long time at the way they had come, as though he could see the sixty miles back to the other town. His shoulders stiffened and he said to Ramón, "No. Damn you, no. I've waited too long. I'll not take the chance."

Ramón studied him for a moment in silence. The deputy moved beside DeRain, his feet widespread again, the guns flourished. He was tall and thin, with blond, almost white hair and a weak softness around his mouth. He tried to frown, and he fixed Ramón with a menacing glare. "You heard what the sheriff said, breed. Move!"

Ramón climbed reluctantly into the coach and took a seat opposite the woman. DeRain struggled in cautiously, and behind him, the kid. They sat together, next to the woman, facing him, with their guns held carefully on their knees.

Ramón leaned back and tried to look around. The curtains were down and he could see nothing but the inside of the coach. He glanced at the woman and caught her staring at him. He expected her to turn away, but she didn't. Her eyes were blue and vacant and he had a brief feeling that she was looking through him.

On the seat outside old Bolts let out a yell and the coach rocked

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back, then forward, and back again. The woman didn't move her gaze. Ramón flashed her a smile without effect. He wished he could see her mouth—that might tell him something—but it was hidden by a fold of the infant's blanket. He considered leaning forward to admire the baby. Perhaps that would stop the woman from staring. But if he did, the fat DeRain would stick a gun in his belly again. He closed his eyes. That way he wouldn't have to see her, though he could still feel her staring. What a strange woman, he thought, and turned his mind to something else.

The road ran as near to the middle of the canyon as possible, but the canyon was narrow, and rocks were continually breaking from the walls and rolling into the path. The wheels of the stage coach struck them, and bounced sideways, back and forth. The motion irritated Ramón and drew him out of his reveries of tequila and beautiful women. He opened his eyes and faced the reality of the woman's stare.

Por Dios, he said to himself. It was bad enough to have the Apaches, and worse than that to be going to gaol, but this woman . . . Still, the gaol was the worst part of it, and he hated to give Sheriff DeRain the satisfaction of seeing him there. It was as the sheriff had said, he had spent a long time looking for El Ladino. And for a while it seemed that he would go on looking for ever. That was probably why DeRain was still alive, because he was so red-faced and harmless.

It must be, or else why had he not killed him? There had been plentiful opportunities and the fat man was a broad target. He was like the clumsy dog that came to play harmlessly with the coyote. Yet now he wasn't so sure. He was beginning to dislike the man, and he thought ruefully of the lost opportunities.

The stage creaked to a stop. The deputy was on the outside of the seat and he raised the curtain and looked out. The relay station stood thirty yards back from the road. A high wall had once surrounded it. The adobe building stood beyond that, and for a moment nothing seemed wrong. Then they saw the smoke rising in thin wisps from the back of the station, and Bolts, from his vantage point on the high seat, could see the man lying spread-eagled in the yard.

The old man shouted and turned the team off the road. The stage came to a stop again and the deputy got out. DeRain motioned Ramón towards the door and followed him down. The woman sat still, and her face grew paler.

Ramón stretched his legs and looked around. One wall of the small building had been pulled down, and the lean-to kitchen lay in a smouldering heap. He went over to the dead man and pulled

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the feathered shaft out of his back. It caught, and he had to twist it to bring it loose. He tried it in his hand.

"Apache arrow," he said.

The deputy took it and turned it round and round and said nothing. DeRain looked at his watch and then at the dipping sun. The messenger, sombre-faced, came down from the seat and leaned against the near wheel, with the shotgun crooked in his arm.

Bolts came round the coach and saw the door open. He shut it. "No sense in her seeing," he said casually. He pointed to the open front of the stable. "There's another one over there."

From the distance it looked like a woman. She was sitting down with her back to the post and her head seemed to be tilted over one shoulder. The deputy had to walk closer before he saw that she had no head at all.

He came back, his face white and the sickness rising in his throat. He opened his mouth in an effort to speak and his lips moved soundlessly.

"Cartwright's wife," Bolts suggested. "And they got all the horses. Those Apaches love horses. They wouldn't leave none."

Ramón turned to the sheriff. "Now you see the Apaches, señor. You go back?"

"No," DeRain said loudly. "We'll stay here for the night. Tomorrow we'll make a run for it." He stared defiantly at the men around him.

Ramón took a corn-shuck cigarette from the pocket of his shirt and lit it. He brought it down from his mouth and held it in his fingers, examining it closely. His voice was low, almost whispering. "Once I had a wife and chiquito, señor. A long time ago. They were killed by a pig like you. But this mother and child, I do not wish them to be killed. If they are, I will stick you."

DeRain's face went livid with rage. "Shut up, dago!" he shouted, and his arm came up in a full, looping swing. Ramón took the blow and fell backwards to the ground. He sat up and pulled the hat forward on his head again, and felt with his tongue at the blood on his mouth. He smiled, showing the thick white teeth. He said, "You are strong, señor. Fat and strong like a pig. It is a pity that I have let you live so long."

DeRain swung his gun from the holster. He started to pull back the hammer but stopped at the woman's scream. "No! Please!"

Ramón twisted in the dirt to look at her. She had stepped down from the coach and was holding the baby high in her arms. Even from the distance he could tell that she was staring at him again. He waited for her to speak once more, but she said

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nothing. He heard the hammer of DeRain's Colt ease down again. He said, " Grácias, señora," and came slowly to his feet.

He didn't look back at the woman. He moved closer to DeRain and stared into the man's face as he addressed her. " But you see, señora, he would not kill me. There is a bigger reward for El Ladino alive. It is too bad."

He laughed and moved away from DeRain and leaned against the crumbling wall of the adobe building. Bolts and the messenger were taking down the strong-box and the rolls of blankets, and he watched them and grew sleepy under the dying rays of the sun.

There was little protection inside the adobe station house. The toppled wall let in the cold desert air and the woman huddled close to the fireplace, the baby wrapped in an extra blanket in her arms.

Ramón sat at the table and played solitaire with a soiled pack of cards. The candle flickered in the breeze and it was hard to see the faces of the other people in the room. The fire might have lighted the woman's face enough, except that she was turned away from the blaze and was watching him again.

The boy deputy paced back and forth across the dirt floor. Old Bolts was hunched in the shadows of the far corner; he had found a jug of mescal that the Chiracahuas had somehow missed. The liquor made a chugging sound in the bottle when he tilted it up. DeRain stood with his back to the fire and kept eyeing the old man. He heard the sound of the mescal. " Save a little," he said irritably.

A coyote yapped and then let out a long howl from a nearby ridge. The cry seemed to send a shudder through the woman. She got up and walked over to the table and sat down. Ramón played a card and glanced at her. " It is only a coyote," he said.

She didn't answer. Her eyes bored into him and he thought she was going to speak. He smiled lightly and played another card. The deputy was watching suspiciously; he had stopped pacing, and rested both hands on the butts of the guns.

Ramón flicked a card impatiently. The candle made jittering shadows on the woman's face. She parted her lips as though to speak. Ramón waited and looked away. He gathered up the cards and stacked them in a neat pile. He shuffled them quietly.

" Why did you do it? " the woman asked.

Her voice startled him. He held the cards poised and looked at her. Her eyes were moist and she was about to cry. " Do what, señora? " he said curiously.

" My husband," she said, and her voice broke, but she didn't cry. He could see where she tightened her jaw muscles in an

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effort to hold it back. He shook his head sadly, but he was interested.

"Your husband . . .?" he asked.

"My husband. You . . ." She seemed unable to go on.

He understood her without hearing further. It made sense, her travelling on a stage coach alone, without her husband. Her husband was dead. That explained the redness of her eyes and the white blankness of her face. But why did she stare at him so?

"Why do you stare at me, señora?" he asked. He dealt out a fresh hand. "Who is your husband?"

She let the tears form in her eyes without brushing them away, but her voice was controlled. "Does it matter? He worked for Mr. DeRain."

"Ha," Ramón said. It was clear now. Yes, he remembered the man. He must have been the one. A young deputy, like the boy here, only with a nicer face, perhaps. He had been very surprised when Ramón had shot him. All this was too bad, in a way. It made Ramón a little uncomfortable. And there were many stages. He could have waited until tomorrow. In many ways it would have been a better ride.

"Why did you do it?" the woman said again.

Ramón shrugged. "It is very simple," he said. "And you should ask Señor DeRain. It was only a week ago, and he should remember. He has had time; he should remember well."

"What's that?" DeRain said from the other side of the room. He was drinking from Bolts's jug and he lowered it to glare at Ramón. A flush had crept over his face and showed brighter in the firelight. "What's that?" he repeated menacingly.

Ramón ignored the man and smiled. To the woman he said, "It is always so with DeRain. He has many deputies, but he lives long." He turned the palms of his hands upward. "I do not know why."

The woman looked at DeRain, and the man tilted the jug and drank and let it drop again. The deputy glanced at him and moved into the shadows. Bolts was now snoring in his corner.

Ramón went on, "It was in the rocks. Your husband . . ." He paused, his eyes fixed on the flickering candle. The man had been a fool, he knew, but suddenly he didn't want to hurt this woman. He said, "He was brave, señora. But he was only single-handed, for Señor DeRain, he is like a lizard, he stays in the rocks. I knew he had left only when I heard his horse. And your husband, I don't think he knew at all. After that, there were only the two of us, and then there was only me. I could not help it."

DeRain was bent over, staring at him, his face tightened in

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anger. He took two steps away from the fireplace and stopped. "You're a liar," he shouted, "a dirty liar!"

"I tell only what I saw, señor."

"Shut up," DeRain shouted. He fumbled with the jug and switched it to his left hand. His jaw trembled and he stared at Ramón through drunken eyes. "Shut up," he repeated.

"I will shut up," Ramón said quietly. "It is better that I do, for I have no wish to die." He glanced at the woman. The moisture was in her eyes again. The baby made a gurgling sound and immediately drew her attention. She looked down sadly and adjusted the folds of the blanket.

It is better that she has the child, Ramón thought; the baby is something to take care of, something to think about, and she will finally forget.

For a moment he remembered his own wife and child. Then the coyote sounded from the ridge again, and an owl sent up a faint hooting at the back of the station house. Ramón listened. It was only a coyote and an owl, he decided. But the Apaches might be out there, waiting patiently for the daylight.

He drew his eyes away from the woman and looked at DeRain. "It is not too late to go back, señor," he said. "I do not care for myself, but for the woman . . ."

DeRain had returned to the fireplace. The jug was empty now and he dropped it with a thud to the dirt floor. "We're goin' on," he said huskily. He took out the Colt and spun the cylinder. "And don't try anything, 'cause I'll be watching."

"Sí," Ramón said wearily. He stood up. There was nothing more he could do, and he had himself to worry about. He moved to the blanket rolls and unstrapped one and rolled it out. "This is for you, señora," he said gently, and moved to the far side of the room. He could see DeRain and the deputy watching him.

The floor was cold where he lay down, but he pushed aside the thought of a blanket. Without one, he would be stiff with the cold and would wake up many times before morning. And perhaps, one of those times, both DeRain and the kid would be sleeping. He closed his eyes and listened for a while to the plaintive wailing of the coyote.

The fire was out when Ramón awoke. Without turning, he made out the form of the deputy huddled in his blankets near the front door. DeRain was a vague, dark shape in front of the fireplace, but he couldn't be sure about his breathing. He waited for a half-hour before the sound became steadier and then he rose silently to his feet.

He crossed the room, his boots noiseless on the dirt, and went

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to the rear door. Old Bolts was lying hunched up in the corner. He would need a gun, Ramón decided, and bent over the man. Bolts snored evenly. Ramón's hand crept to the holster and found it empty, and he straightened up. That was strange, he thought. But maybe the old man had laid it aside somewhere. Well, he had no time to think of it now. DeRain stirred by the fireplace and wheezed in a deep breath. Ramón stepped quietly through the door and made his way along the wall until he came to the corner of the building.

The Apaches had burnt the corral. The horses stood in the stable and nickered softly as he moved among them. In the back he found a length of rope and fashioned a crude halter from it. Then he slipped it over the head of the smallest animal, a chestnut mare, and led her outside.

The animal danced at the strange feeling of the rope and swung in a half circle away from him. He halted, listening. The mare quietened and he moved up beside her, his hand stroking gently at her back. As he worked, he glanced at the far breaks of the eastern mountains. It would be light there soon, in another hour perhaps.

Even now there was a shadow under the roof of the stable. But there would be time enough to get away, and they couldn't follow him. He would have only the Apaches to worry about.

He thought of the woman, and his hand paused on the mare's quivering back. The Apaches. He had seen their practices with women; the images rose up in his mind. And the child. They would crush it against a rock and leave it lifeless on the trail, and it would be a quick, horrible end.

He tried to shrug the thoughts away. It wasn't his concern. The fool DeRain would be responsible. His hand began to move along the mare's back again and then stopped. Still, if he had a gun . . . Por Dios, this is stupid, he told himself. How long would he have lived if he had not ignored such softness? And that softness was working into him now, he could feel it.

"Por Dios," he said again, "but perhaps there is some way that I can find a gun." He looked regretfully at the mare and then led her back into the darkness of the stable.

When he came out again he heard footsteps and slipped quickly into the shadows. His hand went to his side instinctively and came away. He edged closer to the corner and saw the woman move away from the darkness of the building and come towards him, and a little sound of surprise escaped from his throat.

"Señora," he said softly when she had reached the opening.

She stopped, her eyes searching the darkness. Ramón saw the child was bundled in her arms. "Perhaps it is too cold?" he

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said kindly. "Perhaps the baby does not sleep?" She didn't answer. Ramón moved out of the shadows and regarded her questioningly. Already it had grown lighter and he could make out the paleness of her face. "What is it, señora?" he asked.

Her hand went inside the blanket and lingered for a moment and then came out with the gun. She held it clumsily and her eyes went back and forth from it to Ramón.

She said, "I heard you leave; I haven't slept at all. Earlier, I took this from the old man. If you're going now, I think you'll need it."

She extended it to him and he hesitated before taking it.

"I had another use for it," she added tonelessly.

His eyes brightened, but he kept them fixed on the gun. "I see. I see," he said. Then he looked up suddenly. "With this, you were going to kill me."

"I don't know. I thought I was."

Ramón said nothing. He turned the gun over in his hand. He opened the cylinder and saw the five bullets and closed it again. His gaze went to the greying shape of the station house, and his eyes half closed. It would be light in a few minutes and DeRain would be coming out of his drunken sleep. There was still time to get into the hills, though, and with the gun the Apaches wouldn't be so bad. He turned to the woman and found her watching him.

"You go back to the house, señora," he told her. "Later, DeRain will wake up, and the deputy. And after that, perhaps Bolts will turn the coach round."

"But there are two of them," she said quickly.

"Sí," he answered thoughtfully. His gaze went to the nearby hills. "And there are many Apaches." He smiled and put a hand on her shoulder, turning her away. She moved slowly towards the building, and at the corner she stopped and looked back at him before going inside.

Ramón stood in the opening of the stable and lit a cigarette. In the east the sun edged over the rim and threw its light high on the rocks and began to swing gradually upward. The mare nickered and pulled back against the halter. Inside the station house it was quiet, and then came the sudden, angry lifting of DeRain's voice.

The boy deputy ran out into the yard and halted. He was carrying his boots, and as he bent over to slip them on he saw Ramón. He let out a startled grunt and swung instantly back through the doorway. DeRain shouted again, and his cursing finally died out.

Ramón listened and could hear nothing now except the movement of the horses beside him. He stepped to the right, flattening

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himself against the wall of the stable, and cocked the gun. DeRain would be moving towards the back, he knew. DeRain would let the boy come out the front way again, and he wouldn't have any notions about taking Ramón alive now. Ramón was only sorry about the boy, and he remembered the other one, the woman's husband . . .

A chair scraped inside the station house, and Ramón held his breath, his ears straining for another sound. None came. Ahead of him the yard was grey and silent and empty. Far back in the hills a coyote sent up its last yip and the sound of it trailed away and was gone. An instant later the boy stepped through the doorway with both guns leaping in his hands.

The slugs tore into the wall and slashed at the dirt of the yard. A horse whinnied crazily and tried to run out of the stable and was pulled up short by the heavy rope.

Ramón waited until the burst of gun-fire stopped; then he stepped away from the wall and squeezed off the shot. He aimed low, and the boy's leg slammed out from under him, and he buckled sideways. He fell on his shoulder and rolled and came up to a sitting position. He saw the guns a few feet away and started to reach for them and changed his mind. His hands went to the crumpled leg and his face twisted in surprise. He watched Ramón and his eyes grew round and frightened.

Ramón moved up to him slowly. He stopped and looked down at him, and eased the hammer back as he did so. The boy opened his mouth and his lower lip began to quiver; the fight was out of him.

Ramón kicked the guns and sent them sliding out of his reach. Then he stepped through the doorway and swung sharp to the left as he got inside.

DeRain's slug chunked into the adobe and Ramón slid away from it. He saw DeRain in the other doorway and he held his fire as the woman stood up from the fireplace. DeRain fired again and the bullet struck Ramón high on the shoulder and spun him round. DeRain was gone from the opening before Ramón caught himself against the wall and slipped slowly downwards.

The silence came abruptly to the room. The woman stood without moving, her eyes going from Ramón to the child in her arms. Ramón motioned her back towards the jutting corner of the fireplace. He sat up and fought against the wound that flooded his brain with dizziness. Bolts crouched watchfully in the corner.

The messenger moved away from his blankets, carrying the shotgun, and took a hesitating step towards him. Outside, a boot made a crunching noise as it slipped over a stone, and the

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man's eyes rolled back towards the sound. He looked thoughtfully at the shotgun and then at Ramón, and without speaking pitched it forward. It landed on the stock and flipped over and struck against Ramón's leg. Ramón jammed the pistol into his belt and picked up the gun. He pulled back both hammers and heard the sound of the boots again, coming closer to the door.

The woman was clear of the opening now. The footsteps halted and Bolts's wheezy breathing was audible in the room. Outside, the boy let out a groan and was still. Ramón tightened up on the front trigger of the shotgun and stared hard at the doorway. In a moment it would darken. He waited, his eyes growing blurry at the hard light, and then, without warning, the light was gone. He fired, and the crash of both barrels shook and jolted against the air.

DeRain staggered back and his hands groped for the door jamb and held him there for a brief instant. A little hole showed on his cheek and another over the bridge of his nose, and farther down it was hard to tell where he was hit by the darkness of his coat. He balanced for only a moment. His fingers scraped free of the adobe and he went over backwards in a long fall. He lay with one knee bent, and Ramón could see it straighten out in a final shudder. Then he heard the woman screaming.

It was an hour later before they had tied up the boy's leg in the crude splints. Ramón rested one shoulder against the adobe wall and watched Bolts and the messenger helping him up into the coach. The woman stood to one side, and her eyes were watching him again. He smiled at her and remembered her touch as she had bandaged the wound in his shoulder. It was growing stiff now, and the sun was baking his skin where the shirt was torn away.

The woman stepped into the coach and threw him a backward look. He brought his left hand up and moved it just a little, waving to her. Then he couldn't make her out any more, even though the blinds of the stage were rolled high. The Concord started up smoothly under Bolts's patient hands, and went by him. Bolts stood half out of the seat and called down, " You sure you ain't comin', Ramón? "

Ramón shook his head. He looked for the woman and couldn't see her. The stage rolled past the station and the team broke out of the walk then and sent the dust moving up behind them. By the time they had reached the road, he couldn't hear Bolts's voice any more and the sound of the horses gradually died out and he could see only the trail of dust hanging in the air. He half closed his eyes against the sun and shifted his body wearily.

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The sun had climbed up across the sky now and it would be a long walk to wherever he was going. He shrugged and remembered DeRain. He meant to bury the man. Once he would have found pleasure in that, but now something was different. His mind ran back to the early morning when he had led the mare out of the stable. What had stopped him then?

He shrugged. "Por Dios," he said to himself, "what a soft fool I am becoming."

He turned and walked towards the door of the station house, and he was still thinking about it when he went inside where the body of the dead sheriff was lying.

★ ★ ★

## *OVER EXPOSED*

One night we had a scene of a different order. Josephine Baker had gone up to change when we suddenly heard piercing screams coming from her room. My heart in my mouth, I tore along the passage, to find the coloured star, completely unclothed, screaming abuse at some obscure photographer who had slipped into her room, hidden behind a curtain and snapped her just as she had stepped out of one costume and was about to put on another.

I made the young intruder empty his camera and then threw him out. Josephine took a lot of calming down, which is odd considering that the costume she had just been photographed without consisted of three roses.

PAUL DERVAL, *The Folies Bergère*

## *ANSWERS to BRUSH IT ASIDE on page* 14

1. *Landseer, the lion; Thurber, the bloodhound; Modigliani, the giraffe-necked woman; Sir Alfred Munnings, the horse*
2. *a. Giotto b. le douanier Rousseau c. Rossetti d. Toulouse Lautrec*
3. *a. pointilliste b. hung c. cubist d. impressionist e. futurist f. perspective g. on the line*
4. *a. the Manchester Guardian b. The New Statesman and Nation c. the Vatican d. the Daily Express*
5. *Gauguin; Van Gogh; Augustus John (he wrote it); Nicholas Bentley (he drew the pictures)*
6. *Gouache, tempera, poster paint*
7. *a. Leonardo da Vinci b. Michelangelo c. Picasso d. Hogarth e. Epstein*

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# Crime in the Kasbah

**Slinking burnoused figures padded softly over cobbled streets**

by MICHAEL SHERIDAN

IT was as if someone had left open the door of a giant oven in the sky, and the small mountain of a man in the white shantung suit, seated at his accustomed table on the terrace of the Café d'Alger, mopped angrily at the beads of sweat on his bulging neck.

Sliding his aperitif closer, he carefully fitted a cigarette the colour of a cigar into his thin holder, and longed wistfully for something to take his mind off the heat. It came sooner than he expected. From a table a little behind and to the left of him, a murmured buzz of indistinguishable voices suddenly assumed an angry intelligibility. As if seeking the waiter, the man in the white shantung suit half turned in his chair and took a good look at the couple.

It was the girl who held his immediate attention. Obviously English, from her thin pongee suit and elegant leather walking-shoes; obviously young, from the tips of her soft blonde curls to the neatness of her wrists and ankles; she was also obviously in a state of steaming annoyance to match the heat of the climate.

"If there is anything I hate, it's a coward!" she said, her voice still low, but rendered distinct by her anger.

"Be reasonable, Pam," said her escort unhappily. "It would be asking for trouble for us to go back there."

"Us?" the man in the white shantung suit heard her say contemptuously. "What's wrong with you? You're in perfect health, aren't you?"

"You don't understand these—these uncivilized places," the boy continued placatingly. "You can't go making accusations like that. You'd end with a knife in your back. The only time these natives like foreigners is when they can put something over on them. Let's forget the whole thing!"

"Forget it?" the girl's voice rose. "You must be mad! What's wrong with going to the police?"

The man in the white shantung suit repressed a smile and

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turned squarely in their direction. "I am of the police, monsieur," he said succinctly. With a wave of his hand, he indicated his own table. "May I be of help? As you see, your language has no obstacles for me."

When they had seated themselves at his table, the fat man noted with pleasure that in youth and good looks the boy matched the girl. He was tall enough to tower over her protectively, and dark enough to be the perfect foil to her blondeness.

"I'm Roark Cameron," he said awkwardly. "And this is Pamela Carson. We're—er—engaged."

"Inspector Jean Pierre Moreau, at your service," said the detective smoothly, summoning the waiter with a flick of his eyebrows. "You will join me?" And when the order had been given, "So you insisted on visiting the Kasbah without a guide—and you were robbed!"

"You see!" said Pamela's fiancé, "he's not a bit surprised!" He turned to the detective. "Of course she was robbed. It's lucky she escaped with her life—that we both escaped."

Pamela laughed lightly. "Don't mind Roark," she said. "He loves being dramatic. He's a frustrated writer and sees everything as a deep, dark melodrama. Besides, the robbery wasn't inside the Kasbah."

"No," said Roark crossly, "but any fool would know it wouldn't happen that way. We must have been followed back to our hotel."

"That's right," agreed Pamela, and added helpfully, "It could have been any one of three men. They all took a good look at my bracelet."

"A fine bracelet, no doubt?" said Inspector Moreau.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Pamela's eyes shone affectionately at Roark's sulky face. "One large emerald, six small emeralds, and forty-two diamonds. The setting is platinum. It was Roark's birthday present to me."

"It's not the value of the thing," said Roark awkwardly. "The insurance covers that. But it—well, it has a sentimental value. In fact, it's become pretty important to us."

"Of course," the detective agreed, and fingered the single small diamond pin in his brown tie. "Now perhaps it is time to hear of these three men. Do you remember what they looked like?"

Pamela nodded. "We must have climbed tier after tier of cobbled streets, for almost an hour, before we went into the first place," she said. "It was a little jewellery store, kept by a tiny, wizened old man with the eyes of a ferret . . ."

"And bald as a coot!" interjected her escort helpfully.

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"Well, we didn't buy anything, but all the time we were there, he seemed to be watching my right hand. As we went out again, I felt his eyes on me. I didn't think about it then, but later I thought it was strange that he hadn't tried to sell us anything. You always hear that when tourists visit the Kasbah —well . . ."

Inspector Moreau nodded. "Tourists are the bread and butter for the inhabitants of the Kasbah. Sometimes the caviar as well. The man of whom you speak would be Marius the Pig-Sticker."

Pamela shuddered, while Roark's eyes became gleeful. "If you say, 'You see!' just once more," she threatened, "I'll get up and go back to the hotel."

"It is a name he will never lose, although it is thirty years since he went to prison for two or three killings. He had a habit of leaving his card: *This man was a pig and had to die!*" the detective explained. "Now he is a merchant in the Kasbah. He could be the thief, but first let us consider the next one."

"He was a weaver in a cellar," said Pamela, her eyes lighting up. "It was wonderful—so romantic and mysterious. He was quite young and very handsome, and he was sitting on a heap of charcoal, and yet his garments were as spotless as—as your suit."

Inspector Moreau bent his head modestly.

"I watched him working beautiful patterns in the dark, and I couldn't understand how he could see to weave them," she said, her eyes wide. "But I do remember one thing: his eyes seemed as if they were on fire—almost as if they reflected the diamonds in my bracelet!"

"That would be Yussuf the Weaver, who is gifted with cat's eyes and sees in the dark. He plies an honest trade, has no police record, and is affianced to Tenna, one of the *ouled nails*. A doubtful suspect. Now, for the last one . . ."

Quickly, Pamela opened her bag and brought out a tiny jade carving of three monkeys squatting, like circus acrobats, on each other's shoulders. "Look, isn't it divine? *See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil.*"

"Words of much merit," conceded Inspector Moreau.

"Pam spent far too much on it," said the younger man.

"Oh nonsense, Roark! You're just upset at what went on afterwards. You know it's an antique, hundreds of years old. It's a very rare piece of jade, and I was able to get it for only five thousand francs."

"A paltry sum for the rich message it carries," said Inspector Moreau, who hadn't the heart to tell her that every year Ali Bey

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went to Casablanca and bought them by the gross. Or that they were really made of soapstone tarnished green to look like jade. Instead, he encouraged, "Now let us hear the rest of what happened."

After they left the native quarter, so far as Inspector Moreau could piece the story together, the young couple had gone directly to the hotel. At no time were they conscious of being followed. They parted in the lobby, Pamela to change for dinner, and Roark to the bar. "I wanted to get the filthy smells of the Kasbah out of my nose."

In the living-room of her suite, Pamela removed her hat, drew off her gloves, and kicked her tired feet free of her shoes. She undid her bracelet and placed it carefully in a top drawer of the bureau by the window, along with two rings—her engagement-ring, and an antique cameo given to her by her grandmother.

Then she went into the bedroom, undressed, and then into the bathroom to run the bath. Returning to the bedroom, she found that the door leading to the living-room was closed, although she couldn't remember having closed it. She turned and tugged at the knob, but the door wouldn't open.

"All of a sudden I realized that it wasn't a faulty lock. Someone had closed and locked the door," Pamela explained. "I listened but I couldn't hear anything, although I knew—at least, I felt—that someone was on the other side of that door. It was a ghastly feeling, and I could get no help because the telephone was in the living-room."

"So you went to the window and called for help?" suggested Inspector Moreau.

Pamela nodded. "The room overlooked a courtyard full of flowers. In the morning the servants use it, but now it was almost evening and the courtyard was quite empty. I called and called, but no one answered."

"How long were you there?"

"Oh, it was about half an hour before one of the other guests heard me and I was released."

"And then?"

"I found the desk rifled. The bracelet was gone, although the rings remained."

"Throughout that half-hour, you stayed at the window, calling for help?"

"No, I kept going back and trying the door, thinking perhaps it was only jammed and might open, if I tried once more."

"A natural thought. You heard nothing; everything was very, very quiet—*How* quiet?"

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Pamela looked puzzled. "I told you, I heard nothing." She frowned slightly. "Wait, I did hear a sound—like a body falling on the floor, although that doesn't make sense, because there was no sound of a scuffle or anything like that." She smiled wryly at the two men. "Now I suppose *I* sound dramatic!"

Inspector Moreau shook his head. "Anything is possible. When the door was opened, there was no body and no bracelet. Strange."

Twirling his glass absently, the detective looked into space. He was silent for so long that Pamela started to say something, and Roark nudged her to silence. But when Inspector Moreau did speak, it was a disappointment. "Now I must have my lunch," he said politely. "There is nothing more important in a man's life than a good midday meal."

Pamela looked annoyed. "But the bracelet? Don't you think Roark should go back and search for it?"

Inspector Moreau looked at them vaguely. "Ah yes, the bracelet. Forgive me, but I was thinking of the *pastille* I am having for lunch. It's the native pie baked with pigeon livers, eggs, and almonds, and it has eight other ingredients typical of desert cooking. I would ask you to join me, but a man likes to sit on his own sometimes."

The dismissal was plain, and the looks on the faces of the other two showed their feelings.

"But—" Roark began vehemently.

"I understand," said Inspector Moreau, and sighed heavily. "You've been told that unless you have the courage to go back and recover the bracelet you are hardly the man for her."

Pamela tossed her head. "I mean it, too," she said, and added disdainfully, "obviously, the police in Algiers will be of little help."

She turned angrily on her heel, and a resigned amusement showed in the eyes of the detective as he watched her make for the hot, dusty street outside. Roark, a touch of panic in his movements, looked for the waiter to settle the bill, but the detective stopped him short.

"Go, soothe the jaguar," he said, impatiently, "and you will find that she will forget to bite. Only be off with you quickly, as I am feeling the delayed pangs of much hunger." Then, as an afterthought, "It is possible you will hear from the police after I have turned in my report."

The detective was no sooner alone than Maman Félicie appeared at his elbow. "Monsieur l'Inspecteur is fortunate that I do not charge him for using the terrasse to solve his

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mysteries," chuckled the small, plump proprietress of the café. "On your salary, you would not have enough to pay for what you eat—the way you order."

"And you would not be able to keep your café open if I had not taught you the art of la haute cuisine," retorted Inspector Moreau. "Are they still saying I haven't gone near the Commissariat in years because I am a pig who wishes to stay near his trough?" He chuckled. "How little do they know that a man more often works well where he plays well."

Behind the proprietress, the old waiter Amiel, his wizened face wreathed in smiles, appeared with a silver tray. When the lid of the earthenware bowl had been lifted for the detective's approval, his nostrils quivered at the aroma of the harida, the creamy vegetable soup of the Arabs.

"Leave me in paradise," he beseeched the others, and, laughing, they withdrew into the background.

Every day for the five years since he had first arrived from the Sûreté Générale in Paris, it had been like that. And always it seemed that as soon as he had dipped his spoon into his soup, his subordinate, Jourdan, would round the corner into sight, one hand twirling his fair moustache, his cape flying as he walked quickly in the direction of his superior.

This morning Inspector Moreau had already done well by his bowl of harida when the agent de police, grave, militarily erect, and half the detective's age, came to a respectful stop at his table. "Nothing to report, Monsieur l'Inspecteur, as usual!"

But this time the older man beckoned him closer. "On the contrary, there is something."

Quickly, Inspector Moreau recapitulated Pamela's story; quickly, because he wanted to get it off his chest, and because, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Amiel advancing with another steaming dish: couscous. The mutton and vegetables were served with semolina in a hollowed, dried gourd, and flavoured as the detective most liked it, with chili peppers and sweet manioc.

When Inspector Moreau had finished relating the morning's occurrence, the young gendarme allowed himself a brief, knowing smile. "Obviously, the guilty one is the merchant of bibelots, Ali Bey. He has a rapacious eye for fine jewellery." He started forward. "I shall pick him up immediately."

"No!" The detective paused to demolish a generous helping of the delicious couscous. "It will not be at all necessary to apprehend Ali Bey. However, you will first pass by the Hôtel Saint-Georges and get hold of the young Englishman—alone."

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"Him!" The policeman couldn't hide his surprise.

"Again you are wrong," remarked his superior. "The very-much-in-love Monsieur Cameron is to hide from Mademoiselle Carson all afternoon. Tell him to take the bus to Blida where, in the Ruisseau des Singes, our ancestors frolic in the sun."

"But what will the monkeys teach the Englishman?" exclaimed Jourdan.

"Nothing that he does not already know," agreed the Inspector, with a wicked leer. "However, it is I who shall teach him when he comes to meet me here at six, which is what I wish. From the hotel you will go on another errand."

He pushed aside the emptied gourd and looked up as the old waiter approached for the third time. "Ah, the *pastille*—the wonderful, enchanting, breathtaking *pastille*!"

For a while the detective said nothing more, being too busy spearing a pigeon liver. But instead of putting it in his mouth, he held it aloft, appraising it with the eye of a satisfied connoisseur. "Yes; you are to go to the Kasbah also."

The suspense was almost too much for Jourdan. "But if it is not Ali Bey who has stolen the bracelet," he said excitedly, "then it is no other than Marius the Pig-Sticker!"

"No, mon ami," said Inspector Moreau. "No, it is not Marius. You are to go to Yussuf the Weaver and pay him my compliments. You are to tell him that unless he immediately hands you the bracelet with the winking eyes of all the devils in hell, he will be thrown into a dungeon until his bones rot."

The agent de police looked sceptical. "But Yussuf . . ."

"Then," continued the detective, ignoring the interruption, "when he is almost useless, we shall pour oil over the breathing skeleton of what was once a healthy couscous-eating individual and light a match to it. All that, you shall say to the unhappy son of Allah, if he does not hand you, without argument, Mademoiselle Carson's fabulous trinket."

"But how—?"

"That is all for now." Inspector Moreau closed his eyes. "I must rest and enjoy the meal I have just eaten."

Ever somnolent in the day, the port of El Djezair, as many of the natives still call it, starts to sleep in the purple darkness that swiftly follows the dying rays of the setting sun. Here and there, a flickering light, a strain of native music, loud whispers and muted laughter, slinking, burnoused figures padding softly over cobbled stones. Night embraces the town and there springs to life the magic and mystery that has always been, and will always be—Algiers.

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It was then that the Café d'Alger became flooded with light, and Maman Félicie busied herself in the kitchen, while Amiel, the lone waiter, polished the fourteen marble tops of the terrace tables until they shone like star sapphires. It was then, too, that Inspector Moreau, seated at his customary table, received with a gracious nod his habitual vermouth cassis.

The hour of six was still striking when a cab drew up, and Roark Cameron stepped out and paid off the driver. Obviously tipped him handsomely, meditated the detective, because there was none of the usual remonstrance.

As the young man approached the table, Inspector Moreau cordially waved him to a seat and, turning to order another vermouth cassis, did not seem surprised to see Jourdan suddenly appear in the background.

"You look a little weary, Monsieur Cameron. The cassis will do you good. There is no better drink in the whole of France."

Roark Cameron gratefully took a long draught of the iced aperitif. "Amazing place, Blida," he said. "Never saw so many monkeys in my life. They were stringing from tree to tree in live ladders. Just like a circus. I'm glad you sent me."

Inspector Moreau smiled as if to himself. "Now I suppose you are eager to hear what has transpired."

At the other's anxious nod, the detective put his hand in his pocket, and when it came out, it glittered with green and white lights.

"Pam's bracelet!" Roark's mouth fell open, and he reached out eagerly.

But Moreau replaced the piece of jewellery in his pocket. "First, a toast to Mademoiselle Carson, a beautiful and intelligent young woman—long may she look in your direction."

Inspector Moreau raised his glass, and the younger man followed suit while, in the background, Jourdan, his hand caressing his fair moustache, hid a smile. Always the romantic, and always the actor, he thought, but listened eagerly, nevertheless, to what his superior had to say.

"It was Yussuf the Weaver," Moreau announced. "And my most able assistant"—he nodded over his shoulder—"returned with, as you say in English, the goods. After I heard Mademoiselle Carson's story, there was really no doubt in my mind that it was Yussuf who had committed the theft."

Roark looked puzzled. "You mean you got it back without leaving the café terrace, without a lot of investigating, without—"

"It wasn't necessary," retorted the detective. "Let us say that his infamy was only discovered by this humble eye and

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arm of the law, because Yussuf is a good Christian—or rather, Moslem."

"I don't understand," murmured Roark, and over the detective's shoulder exchanged a bewildered look with the equally perplexed agent de police.

Inspector Moreau allowed one of his rare chuckles to escape his bulging throat. "You see, I have known Yussuf for many years. Unlike Ali Bey or Marius, who are confirmed infidels and fear neither man nor god, Yussuf is a devout follower of the Prophet. Wherever he might be, whatever he might be doing—he would faithfully follow his religion."

The detective paused to take a long swallow of the vermouth cassis.

"Yes, Yussuf's religion betrayed him. That sound that Mademoiselle Carson heard was indeed that of a body falling, by the window overlooking the back courtyard of the hotel, and through which the intruder had entered. The window faces east, as I recall the courtyard, and from it one could hear the voice of the muezzin calling to the faithful."

"But what has all that got to do with his stealing Pam's bracelet?" asked the young man. Behind him, Jourdan was starting to grin.

"Everything—towards his being identified," explained the detective. "At sundown, all good Moslems prostrate themselves on the ground, and what Mademoiselle Carson heard was the sound of Yussuf making his peace with Allah."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the young man admiringly.

Inspector Moreau nodded complacently. "That is probably what will happen to Yussuf eventually, mixing his religion with romance—for you understand, he would not have stolen the bracelet but for his infatuation with Tenna. She is a woman, that one, who would demand jewels."

Roark Cameron put out his hand. "I think, monsieur, you are to be congratulated." He gave a wide grin. "As for myself, it is my first experience of a café-chair detective. I can't wait to tell Pam how you got it back."

The detective bowed, as well as he could without knocking over the table. "Maman Félicie should have most of the credit. Keeping me healthy down here"—he patted his stomach—"keeps me alert up here"—he tapped his forehead. "Only, you are not to tell your loved one anything about how it happened."

"No?" said Roark, in surprise. "Why not?"

"Because it is time that you made your peace with Mademoiselle Carson," said the detective sternly. He handed the bracelet

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to the young man. "You will tell her that you went to the Kasbah and recovered it yourself. That is why I had you vanish all afternoon. If I know women, she has probably been searching all over town for you."

After Roark had left, Jourdan emerged quietly from the corner of the terrace.

"You deserved the credit," he said sadly, "and now you will not even have the satisfaction of a thank-you."

"On the contrary, my dear Jourdan, there is great satisfaction in knowing that, in the eyes and heart of the beautiful Mademoiselle Carson, the young man will achieve a new stature.

"You will find as you grow older—as old as I am, for instance—that sometimes it is good to give a little help to people in love." Inspector Moreau's interpretation of a negligent shrug was a masterpiece.

"The road to romance is so often full of pitfalls."

★ ★ ★

## *NIGHT-LILAC*

Lilac alone,
Standing so quiet, so dim, outside
Till the door-light died
On cricket and stone,

Do you sleep at last?
Or beyond this night that has taken my yard
Do you stare more hard,
In a night more vast;

At the great white things
That move the outermost world: the whale,
The stallion, the pale
High planet with rings,

The raven, the bull,
And the midnight mountain that never is black?
Lilac come back!
My lawn is too full

Of the dark; and the fine
Impalpable shadows will never be still.
Return as you will,
Dim lilac, and shine.

MARK VAN DOREN

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# SWAMP BOY

**A grinning, flattened snake-head swayed within a foot of his legs**

by JOHN KRUSE

YOUNG Jack Bone was not a boy to panic. He had been through too much for that. But his neck was taut and his eyes fixed as he raced his dug-out along the forest river, flicking the prow first one way, then another, to avoid the hardwood spikes that broke the scum. Lianas grated his gunwales. Lily-pads scuffed under his keel.

The thing they had warned him against was happening. The thing they said you couldn't beat.

The forest had died on him. An hour ago it had shut down and died. The swamp flies and mosquitoes had left him first. One moment they had been round his head, under his shirt, stinging and biting him all over; the next they had gone. Inside a minute, every bullfrog and parrot and monkey along the river had gone silent.

Nothing moved. Not a splash, not a rustle.

Young Jack had stopped paddling and blinked his fever-bright eyes. He had sniffed the air. It had smelt the way it always smelt—like a hot-house gone rotten. He had looked up at the sky. What little he could see of it was crystal-blue.

New moon wasn't for another night. In the Guiana central forest the rains came with the moon. If it wasn't rain, then what was it?

Jaguar? He had held his breath and listened, with the river twisting him sluggishly in the gloom. The great matted vault was still as an empty church. Nothing moved but the pale ghosts of vapour curling about his gunwales.

Suddenly he had dug his paddle deep in the water and started the canoe downstream.

Get a-movin', boy, he had told himself.

It was weather, all right. Blue sky or green, there was big weather coming. And if it caught him here in the swamp country, he would wind up the way they had said he would.

Running the swamp country killed two men in every three that tried it. It was a death-trap—a natural barrier between the coast

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and the rich minerals of the Sierra. Split into a million waterways, crawling with anacondas and caymans, malaria-infested, it had a land level of two feet and a flood level of ten.

If you had jungle savvy and a skin like boot-leather, with a constitution to match, you could maybe beat the reptiles and fever. But you couldn't beat the weather. If it came, it came. The whole forest turned into a river. You either drowned or died of starvation up in the trees.

Jack hadn't got a skin like boot-leather. It was more like tallow, shiny where it stretched over the bones. But he had resilience—a lean-jawed, camel-throated, hunker-squatting resilience—and he knew swamps. He knew them through being born and raised in the Everglades, Florida. They were in his blood, deep enough for him to know things without figuring them out.

But knowing swamps wasn't everything. There was the living alone for a year up in the Sierra once you got there, the close watch you had to keep on yourself to see you didn't let camp routine slide, or get dirty or sick or dead, or let up on the digging. And there were the ticks that ate hell out of you night and day, and ants that could eat a man's whole equipment and leave him just the rivets, and the snakes . . .

Jack Bone was eighteen. He had six younger sisters and two younger brothers and a mother who couldn't straighten her back. His father had been a truck-driver in his sober moments, which meant he hadn't done a lot of trucking. He had died two years before, leaving Jack at sixteen to take on the full responsibility of keeping the home going, with, for working capital, two broken-down trucks, a lot of debts, and a name that could shut any door in the locality faster than a spring latch.

Jack's first action had been to approach Doc Humphries for a small loan to help him get the trucks back on the road. Expressionlessly the Doc had gone into his surgery and brought back a slip of paper made out in his father's handwriting. It was an IOU for two thousand dollars.

Jack had gone home thoughtfully. He had carried on thinking half through the night. The next day, his mind made up, he had sold the remains of the two trucks for a hundred dollars apiece. He had given the money to his mother, made up a package of his clothes, and hitched south to Key West.

He knew exactly what he was going to do. To his way of thinking he could never stand square on his two feet until the debt was paid; and he was not a boy to hang about.

He had worked his way across to Havana as a bait boy. From there it had taken him a year to work on down through the islands to Guiana—a year of dodging the Immigration Authorities, of

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eating spare and sleeping rough in order to scrape together something to send back to the family every month.

He had slipped into Guiana on a banana boat, with enough sewn into the lining of his jacket to buy some used mining equipment and a dug-out canoe. Raising the plane fare inland to Lake Surucucu had taken him a month of truck-driving by day and cinema-operating by night—under constant threat of arrest for illegal entry.

But he had raised it and, with the same calm determination, had pushed up through the swamps to the Sierra, where he had worked non-stop for a year. And now he was on his way back.

He was thinner—by about three stone—and the calmness and determination had shrunk back into him till it was just a gleam in his sunken eyes. He had had three bad bouts of fever, and his skin was yellow from taking mepacrine to suppress it. But he was carrying back with him, strapped to his belt in a drawstring canvas bag, about thirty thousand dollars' worth of industrial diamonds.

On the up-trip he had blazed the trees carefully to show him the way back. The last blaze had told him he had forty miles to go to reach the lake. Forty whole miles, he thought. A day's travel. The moon rains were a day early.

Or he was a day late. The explanation hit him so suddenly that he had to drag the paddle inboard and lean on it. His mepacrine-clogged mind tried to grapple with the idea. A year was a long time. Could he somehow have missed a day? Heck, no; it had been routine with him, striking out the days—his last act every night before climbing into his hammock.

And yet all that malaria up there on the plateau . . . The last go had had him raving like a madman for four days. Supposing he had blacked out and not knowing it, skipped a day? Just supposing . . .

Then everything would be out: the weather, Mr. Hudson—he would be waiting at the lake for him tomorrow, not the next day. All set at eight in the morning, dangling his legs off'n the wing, and looking at his wristwatch, and after a spell, he would slide back into the cockpit with a shrug and head back to Georgetown to keep up his other schedules. Mr. Hudson was a busy man.

That was just supposing. But could it be true?

He guessed it was true, all right. He had specially checked up on the rains—planned the whole trip against them. "They'll not be lettin' youse down," one old-timer had told him. "So long as you make the swamp run between moons. But just one

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day over, me boy, and you'll be pitchin' craps up there with the rest of them." And he had turned his eyes up and his mouth down, adding, " So help me! "

So he was caught both ways. The country beyond the lake was impassable after the rains, he had been told. " A rubber duck'd not make it, and it's me that's tellin' youse."

It seemed like a million years ago—a different world. Jack stayed where he was, leaning on his paddle. He could feel the mepacrine damping his will-power, like a flu hangover, only worse.

Get a-movin', he told himself. What was the use? He was all washed up. Dear Lord, he thought, please get me a-movin'.

It was like being caught in molasses. He had been taking the little pills like cough-sweets. He made an experimental move with the paddle. A lead weight seemed to hit him behind the eyes; but he kept on moving. He straightened out the canoe and got it going.

The waterway split up into two. He looked for his blaze; slid the dug-out round into the left-hand channel, skirting a mud tongue, star-pitted and grooved with cayman tracks, and along under the canopy of silverballi trees. Jeepers, it was still—shock-still and echoey, but with nothing to echo.

The stream widened by stages. The trees gave way and suddenly there was sunlight. The sunlight was orange. It hung in a writhing cloud above the water, caught in the vapour.

As he paddled along towards it, the apparition faded to a frightening glow and vanished. A shiver went through the forest. He looked up. An iron-grey cloud had swirled across the sun.

The sight awoke his instinct of self-preservation. He reached over to get his machete, and slid it into the sheath on his belt. What else? Mepacrine. If he was going to get stranded anywhere, he would need that. He checked the drawstring on his precious bag; checked the buckle of his sweat-rotted belt.

Then he began to paddle. He paddled as hard as he could. The sunlight burst out again; died instantly. It began to come and go like a crazy lantern show.

In a rising tempo of alternate colour and darkness, Jack struggled on down the river. He came to another confluence. In almost total darkness, he peered about him for the blaze that would give him his direction. He caught a gleam of white on the trunk of one of the trees and took the eastern channel.

Nothing but a miracle could save him now, he knew. He wasn't scared. Not exactly. He just felt bad about everything—Mom and the kids still hanging on back there, believing in him, the Doc. They'd never know for sure what happened to him—how

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close he'd got. It was the not being able to tell anybody—the being so alone—that was the god-awfullest part.

Suddenly the gloom was ripped apart by a blinding jigger of light, followed by a thunderclap. There was a moment of almost tangible silence; then with a whispering roar, the rain hit the roof of the forest.

At first it was just a sound, rushing and echoing amongst the boles of the trees; then it was water, breaking through in a fine spray; then it was a deluge, pulverizing the surface of the river, thumping into the canoe—cataracts of it.

Jack groped for his baseball cap; crammed it onto his head—not to keep him dry, but in order to see. The water gushed off the peak like a curtain in front of his eyes. He pushed up the brim. The water pushed it down again. The dug-out fouled the bank.

As he backed off there was borne in on him a sense of danger that had nothing to do with the rain. He was too busy to pay any attention to it. He couldn't see a yard in front of him. He headed into the darkness with short, desperate strokes of the paddle.

But the feeling persisted. He was off course. This waterway was taking him east, and he should have been going north. He knew it as instinctively as he'd have known if he'd been off balance.

That last junction, he thought. Should he go back? He hesitated. The canoe was filling fast. If he went back would he be able to see the junction?

Something battered against his face with a harsh scream. He clawed it away. A big bird. It slapped him with sodden wings, trying to fly. He pushed it away from him, and the rain beat it down into the water, where its shrieks were lost in the roar of the storm.

Jeepers, it had made him jump. He started paddling. He would find another way round. The waterways were all linked up. If he went back he would never be able to follow his old blaze marks anyway.

He paddled across the river to the northern shore, kept along it, guided by the flashes of lightning. Things were happening all around him—half-heard things—animal noises, flappings and splashings. God willing, I'll find a passage through, he thought. It was like a nightmare—one of those fever nightmares he had had up there on the Sierra a thousand years back.

He was paddling blind for whole minutes at a time. Suddenly there were branches. They seemed to come from both sides of him. They caught the canoe and held it. Without understanding what had happened, he worked his way forward into the prow

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and slashed out with the machete. By pulling on the branches he was able to slide the dug-out forward a few feet. It stuck again. Again he struck out with the machete.

Lightning flashed. He saw then that he was in a matted tunnel-way less than six feet across. A creek. Somehow he must have pulled round into it. He started to back out. Then he stopped.

Maybe this was it—a way round. He held himself very still and tried to sense whether he was facing the right direction. He couldn't sense anything. The rain, gushing down between the branches, nearly choked him. Take a chance, he thought. He ducked down in the prow and continued to pull himself along.

Something splashed the water heavily within a yard of his face. The canoe tilted dangerously as a large body fought its way past in the narrow waterway.

Wow! he thought, a croc. This was just the place for them. The thought scared him, but he had made up his mind. He hacked at the sodden vegetation, tearing his hands on the thorns. His cap was gone. He was breathing with his head down and his mouth open, inhaling water with every gasp.

The boat was getting heavy. The water was up round his thighs. If he didn't empty her out soon, she would sink; but with crocs and heaven knows what else in the water, he was scared to try.

Presently the prow began to go under. Jack fumbled the machete back into its sheath and got hold of the paddle. Gripping the paddle and both gunwales, he went over the side into the warm, black water; rolled the canoe over his head, feeling for the bottom with his feet.

There was something down there. A log, maybe. He pressed against it and it gave. He went under. By pushing upwards frantically he managed to right the canoe. He scrambled back into it, gasping.

A branch, he tried to tell himself. Get a grip on yourself. You're fever-crazed. He forced himself to get out the machete again and crawl up forward.

Gradually, it became more and more difficult to slide the canoe along. The water was rising fast. He felt his arms growing heavy. He was using the machete in both hands now.

He clenched his eyes and swung. The blade cut empty air. He hit his fists on the prow. The big knife twisted out of his grasp and plopped into the water.

The impetus of the blow nearly carried Jack after it. He recovered his balance and sat perfectly still in the rain. He was trapped.

He sat without moving, the accumulated weariness of a year

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deadening the whole of his body. It was almost good not to have to do anything.

The canoe rocked a little, seemed to swing. He opened his eyes.

He was in open water! The tunnel had vanished. In its place, in the greyness that filtered down through a rent in the canopy, a great current breathed and rolled under a mist of lashing rain. It was tangled with debris—undergrowth, whole trees. They loomed past, hesitating, struggling loose, their branches clawing the air.

The dug-out twisted round. Jack grabbed up the paddle, but before he could do anything the craft was caught up by the current and snatched away.

There was a moment of speeding along backwards with the water slopping in over the gunwales, a moment of desperately trying to keep balanced; then over she went. The dug-out slapped down on top of him, driving him under.

He came up gasping, unable to see or breathe for the rain exploding on the surface. Something hit the back of his neck. He grabbed at it. By some miracle it was the boat. He hooked his arms over the keel.

The boat twisted along dizzily, bumping into things. Some of the things were alive.

The next moment a sinewy something caught hold of his neck and a body fastened itself onto his back. A thrill of horror went up his spine. He tried to shake it off, but it clung to him. He hunched his neck, half expecting it to attack him, but it just hung on to him. Whatever it was, it seemed to think he was a hunk of driftwood, so he kept his body stiff and shut his eyes.

His arms were just beginning to slip when there was a heavy jar. Undergrowth whipped across his face; the boat slid out from under him. He made a grab at it, but his fingers slipped off the smooth hull. He got hold of something—a vine—and tried to check the boat with his foot. It evaded him. The current nearly jerked his arms from their sockets.

He hauled himself up the vine, peering over his shoulder after the canoe; but it was gone, swallowed up in the rain. His knees hit rock. He dragged himself up onto it and stretched flat out, panting, the flood jerking at his ankles.

His hand moved automatically to his belt. He still had the diamonds. At that moment he felt the weight go from his shoulders. Looking up, he saw that it was a howler monkey. It bounded onto the rock, spluttering, and leapt upwards.

Peering after it, Jack found that he was lying against the base

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of a gigantic, vine-matted tree. The monkey clambered up the vines and disappeared. He looked about him.

There was just the tree and the narrow summit of rock—nothing else. The flood raged all around. He was marooned. And he had company.

Within a yard of him crouched a big ant bear. It was shuddering and blinking its little eyes at nothing. It looked half dead. And there were two coati mundis, an armadillo, and a young tapir still with its baby-stripes. They cowered against the vines, making no sound. They took no notice of him at all.

Jack pulled himself up till his feet were clear of the water. He knew that the flood had not reached anywhere near its highest level. In a few minutes it would be over the rock. There was nothing he could do about it, except maybe climb the tree. But how long could he hang on to that?

He felt so tired. He just wanted to sleep. His mind began to haze over. He struggled onto all fours and worked his way up onto his feet. Keep moving, he thought.

It was the first time he had stood on his two feet for thirteen days. Coming through the swamp country he had eaten and slept in the canoe—the only thing to do if you aimed to stay alive. And now standing up made him feel sick. He leaned his head against the tree and groaned.

The trunk beneath the creepers felt hard—hard as stone. He leaned there, feeling its hardness with his fingers. The next moment he was tearing away the vines, peering at it, tapping it. It *was* stone!

His first thought was that the tree had in some way become petrified. But the trunk was smooth—chisel-smooth—with mighty clefts in it like stonework.

Then his groping hands located a regular-shaped hole that could only be an entrance, and he knew that what was beneath the creeper was not a tree at all, but a tower.

The entrance was overgrown, except for one gap close to the ground. He got down on his knees and, easing his head in cautiously, peered up.

Inside, it was completely black. That meant there was still a top to it. He waited for the next flash of lightning. When it came, half a dozen vine-choked windows leapt into brilliance. He caught the wet gleam of steps.

Exhausted, sick though he was, there was still enough of the boy left in him to feel a twinge of excitement. None of the men he had spoken to had mentioned a tower. Who could have built it—and when? And how? Apart from the one he was on, he had seen no sign of any rock in the swamp country. Whoever

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had constructed this must have shipped it up block by block from the falls. Jeepers, what a job! Why had they done it?

He lay there, with his head in the dry, listening to the slap of rain against the masonry. It felt old; it smelt old. Creepy, like some of those ruins he had seen on Haiti.

He had lain there for several minutes when something hit his legs. There was a splintering crash.

He jerked his head out to find that a floating tree had run aground on the rock. Branches smashed against the tower and dropped into the water about him. He ducked swiftly into the hole and crouched there, watching the big tree break up.

The current hauled at it, but it had grounded hard. Something was silhouetted against the sky. He thought it was a liana. Then he looked again.

A couple of yards above him, looped between the boughs like a huge skein of wool, was a twelve-foot snake. It was unravelling itself slowly, its head gliding down through the air towards him.

Jack's heart began to pump. For a moment he couldn't move. The great body slid down out of the tree with a controlled, unrelenting power.

It had nearly reached him when he found the wits to snatch himself back into the tower. He straightened up, blundered a few paces in the darkness, and fell against the steps. He began to scramble up them, feeling above him with his hands.

He climbed a few feet and looked back. He could see nothing. Nothing. He listened. Only the roar of the flood. He climbed a few steps farther, hesitantly. He had no idea how far they went up. It was murder without a light—real murder. His heart was crashing about inside him.

It had looked like a bushmaster, but it could have been an anaconda. If it was a bushmaster, it would make a noise moving —a dry sound. But he wouldn't be able to hear it.

Still now, absolutely still, listening, staring into the blackness. His breath came to him through the bones of his head like the bellows of a blast-furnace. He gulped it back, held it till he could hold it no longer.

At that moment a double flicker of lightning lit the tower. A grinning, flattened snake-head swayed within a foot of his legs.

With a gasping cry he leapt backwards and scrambled up the steps, stumbled, slid back. He clawed himself to a stop with his finger-nails. His feet scuttered on the stone as he rushed upwards, every detail of what he had seen engraved on his brain—the eyes, like hot coals in the sudden light, the deadly snout, the body a foot thick, gleaming from the rain, reaching right

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down the steps and out of the tower. The biggest danged bushmaster he had ever seen.

He groped his way upwards. At the top there would be a platform, a window—something. If it followed him, he would throw himself out—throw himself out—his breath was sawing in his throat.

A snarling roar, heavy as an aero-engine, split the air within inches of his head. He ducked, hit the steps in a huddle. Hot breath rolled over him, fetid, rotten.

The ferocity and impact of the sound robbed Jack of the power to move. He just lay there, stupefied, waiting for the attack that must follow.

Seconds passed. Nothing moved. The beast was so close that he could feel the warmth of its body. The cat stink of it stung his membranes. Only one creature in all the continent could make a row like that: jaguar.

Now he daren't go back or forward. He lay like a boy hypnotized. The seconds dragged into minutes. The rain slashed at the tower. The steps were cold and wet against his face.

Suddenly something tapped his heel. He lay absolutely motionless. It seemed to him that above the roar of the floods he could hear a sound—like someone dragging a heavy sack. Then he felt a weight against his foot. The weight increased, pinning his foot to the steps.

He wanted to move, to cry out, to leap up and rush headlong down the steps and throw himself into the water. He wanted . . . He lay there. He lay there, watching himself lying there, with death at his head and death at his feet, and his heart thumping in great hammer-blows.

Slowly, very slowly, he lifted his head and stared down to where his feet were. His imagination built upon the darkness, filling the narrow stairway with coil upon gleaming coil of distended, breathing muscle.

Then the lightning flashed—and it was true.

Directly above the snake there was a window. He could see every scale, the couched head, the eyes lidless and staring. The light flicked across it, leaving it to contort and grow huge in his mind's eye, to slither up beside him, draw back its head to strike.

He opened his mouth to yell, but no sound would come. The minutes crawled by. He was tensed from head to foot to take the burning stab of fangs. Lightning flickered again. The snake hadn't moved. It just lay there, gathered, watchful.

There followed another period of darkness. He dared not blink an eyelid. But when the next flash came, it still hadn't moved. He relaxed a notch—he had to. Why was it waiting?

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why were they both waiting? He couldn't see the jaguar, but he could smell it—like tom-cats, but fouler.

Oh God, he thought and, for no reason, what time is it? It was after dark. What in the name of heaven did time matter anyway? They didn't make this sort of time in clocks. Time was what you were doing, he guessed. When you were dying or waiting to die, it was a different brand of time—like waiting for mallard to come in—squatting in the rushes, with the water striking cold through your boots and the freshness in your nostrils, and thinking mixed-up, early-morning thoughts, with the light changing slow, awful slow, but kind of good to watch, and all the time listening for the "few-few-few" of pinion feathers that was always as clean and sweet as that first time when you were a kid and your father was with you.

Mallard took their time, all right. My gosh, they did. He could feel the deadness moving up through his legs from squatting too long, just like it was now.

It *was* now. His mind came back with a jerk. The blood was thudding at the back of his knee. He couldn't feel his foot at all.

Sure enough, I shall go crazy, he thought. I've got to do something. I've got to make a move before they do. He collected his strength. He would take a header through the window.

He lay there. He wondered if maybe he really was hypnotized. He had once seen a barn rat hypnotized by a rattler. Bushmasters were akin to the rattler—the biggest, meanest, deadliest type of pit-viper there was. So why was it just lying there?

Snakes were queer in the dark. He remembered reading somewhere that in Africa, when the natives crawled down the porcupine holes to spear porcupine, they often ran into a black mamba coiled up asleep. They would feel over its body till they found its head, then yank it out quick. So long as it was dark, the snake wouldn't lay fang to them; but once it saw daylight, it went crazy.

Maybe it was true. Maybe it was all made up. Maybe—*Was that it moving now?* Every muscle in his body went rigid. His eyes and ears strained at the dark.

Still nothing happened, and at last he felt his muscles begin to go. His neck went first, wilting like a cut plant too near the stove, back, back. He felt the stone, suddenly cold, against his scalp. His jaw sagged and presently he heard a sound—a rattle—and it was his own breath, and he could do nothing about it.

Time drew out gradually into a great snake—a bean-shoot climbing to the sun with clockwise motion. Why was it so? Beans climbed clockwise and eels found their way back to the rivers where they were born and bushmasters struck hip-high, and there was nothing you could do but accept the law.

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There were many laws, and if you wanted to survive, you had to accept them. That was the secret he had learnt. He remembered it now and relaxed his unwilling body. Accept, he thought.

He lay there. The lightning faded to a glimmer. The rain had begun to make a sound like "wet." That meant it was lessening; but the flood would go on rising until the mountains had drained themselves. It would always be so.

And presently, above the last tatters of the rain, he seemed to hear the breathy sound of the snake. It is sleeping, he thought. They had a kind of cartilage in their throats.

Now? he wondered. Not yet. He was suddenly much calmer. When the time was right, he would know what to do. He had accepted.

They lay there, the three of them, sheltering from the flood. It was a truce, an uneasy truce. "Hernando—" he said to himself, and wondered why he said it—"de Alava," he added.

It was a name—a Spanish name. It had come to him from the darkness, as though someone had whispered it in his ear. He listened, a peculiar sensation spreading inside him. The roar of the flood filled the tower now, echoing as it swirled against the lower steps. Ghosts, he thought. But ghosts were just wishful talk by folks who had lost somebody.

Then he realized that his fingers had been tracing out something engraved in the stone. It was an inscription.

More laboriously now, because he was thinking about it, he spelt out the name again: *Hernando de Alava* 1528. That was all. It seemed to be enclosed in a sort of scroll. Fifteen-twenty-eight! that was a while back, a whole long while.

He lay there, his mind wandering round it. He felt dopey. Maybe they had been after diamonds, too. They were always after something, those Spaniards. They had maybe built the tower as a staging-point, a flood refuge, to help them get the stuff back.

Even as long ago as that, he thought. It gave him a strange feeling, like having crashed in on someone else's claim.

The name Isabella came to him; and, a little later, for no reason, Juarez. He didn't know much about history, but they were fine names—full of fire and music. Something gone. He felt a sadness. Sadness stretched like a fine mantilla in the air about him . . . intangible as dust . . . His mind began to drift.

He brought it back with an effort of will; but it drifted away from him again—farther and farther away. He couldn't stop it. He slept.

He woke up slowly, as was his habit, first moving his eyes. He

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stared up into the darkness, wondering where he was. It seemed to him in those first moments that he could hear a cockerel crowing in that muffled way they have when the light begins to change. Then his mind focused, and he knew where he was, and that it was still the sound of the snake as it slept.

He didn't move. He didn't have to, to know that he felt terrible. There was sickness in his bones. His joints ached. He had no feeling at all in his right leg.

He strained his head up an inch. A rectangle of lesser dark told him that fore-dawn was on its way. There was not enough light yet to penetrate into the tower. He knew that, when it did, its rays would stimulate the two creatures beside him to life and hunger and, flood or no flood, the truce would be over.

The horror of his position came back afresh. He must have been crazy to go to sleep. What did you do? I went to sleep. The casual touch. Only he didn't feel casual; he felt as if he had been knocked down by a bus. But dawn was coming, and he had to do something.

It would have to be all in one movement. If only he could be sure how tight his leg was fixed. Supposing there was a coil looped around it! A stumble, an error of judgment, one split second's delay could mean death.

He waited, watching the light harden beyond the creeper. The creeper. He would have to hit the gap in the centre and hit it right. Have I sufficient strength, he wondered.

Now he could make out the snake—a muscular something, huge in the greyness. Beyond it he could see an assortment of shapes huddled on the steps, and he realized for the first time that the lower part of the tower was full of animals too.

Get ready, he thought. Dear Lord, make my aim true. He took a few breaths to get his blood circulating.

At that very moment the sound from the snake ceased.

Jack snatched in his breath and threw himself towards the window, at the same time dragging at his leg.

For an instant it wouldn't come free; then it did. Off balance, he hit the stonework with his shoulder. Kicking frantically with his good foot, he dived for the gap in the creeper, hung there for a fraction of a second, worming his way through.

He heard a hiss behind him like the compression brakes of a big truck. Something struck the sole of his boot with the force of a sledge-hammer. Then he was falling.

He hit the water flat, but there was no pain. As he went under, the knowledge that he had made it lit up his mind like a star-shell. The thick, water-hardened sole of his boot had saved him.

Then he was fighting for his life in a great sliding expanse of

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wreckage. Jagged spears of hardwood, islands of decayed vegetable matter, whole palm heads bobbed and twisted under the failing stars, jamming, building up into dams, breaking. The dank air groaned and split with the stress of waters.

Jack clutched at a piece of wood and hung onto it, felt the excruciating surge of blood pumping back into his leg. The piece of wood bucked him, turned over on him. He looked up to see a dead cypress bearing down on him, its branches couched like lances. One of them slashed across his shoulder. He caught at it, and went under with it as it rolled in the water.

The next moment he was down under the tree, deep down, shut off from all sound and air. Something hit him in the stomach. Somehow he hung on. Lungs bursting, he hauled himself up the branch. Then he had an arm over the smooth trunk and the air and sound were back, with the morning stars swinging in crazy arcs above him.

He tried to climb onto the tree, but it was rolling so much it was all he could do just to hang on. It spun and twisted its way downstream, chafing him wickedly, until finally it hit something with a heavy shock.

Jack was flung backwards, half stunned. There was a moment of not knowing which way up he was, whether he was above or below the surface. Then he had hold of something. He clung to it. The thing seemed to jack-knife and struck him a heavy blow. He had a glimpse of a big striped body gliding away from him. An iguana!

There was no time to think about it. He clawed his way through a lot of small wreckage, found another tree. He heaved his belly across its trunk and hung there, gasping, with the water swirling past his face.

After a while he struggled up astride it. A feathery feeling went up his spine and hit the base of his skull like a small explosion. He clung to the creeper that encircled the trunk and wondered what had happened. Slowly the coloured lights in his head settled. He blinked about him.

The tree rode low in the water, held steady by its leafy branches.

A pole, he thought. Why did he feel like this? Never mind how he felt—a pole. He looked for a pole. He felt like death on a marble slab.

He got hold of a branch and dragged it up out of the water. He broke off the twigs and kneed the end off. A shudder convulsed him.

He knew then. The mepacrine had worn off. The fever in him was coming to the surface. He felt in his pocket for the bottle. It was broken. The pills had dissolved into a yellow mess.

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Hell, he thought. He worked himself into a central position on the trunk, braced his back against an upright stump, and got the pole ready.

The tree lumped along on the current. Whenever it looked like getting jammed, Jack used the pole. The pole was cumbersome and his limbs seemed to be filling slowly with concrete, but somehow he managed to keep the tree on the move. While he alternately sweated and froze, the dawn spread—green first, then gold. The sun came glaring up behind the trees, and it was a wonderful, deadly day with the water looking like sheet metal far into the trees, and everything starkly brilliant.

The river widened and the wreckage spread out in the sunlight, racing and bobbing along. Jack hung onto the stump, screwing up his eyes against the light. It was the Sierra all over again—the same old behind-glass feeling. Shall I ever make it, he wondered. He twisted a look up at the sun and tried to make sense of it.

Half past seven, he told himself. And deep down inside him he knew suddenly that he hadn't milked the cow. There wasn't any cow—he knew that too—but the feeling of guilt persisted, making him clench up his face and grow hot with shame.

He tried to think what it really was that he hadn't done—something he had forgotten. He was to meet somebody. He heard a roar. It was his old man starting up the truck. "Drop you in at the store, son?" "O.K., hang on a mo, Dad."

The store was just a block away from Sam's Bar. He knew it, and his old man knew he knew it, and it would be between them all the way into town. "Good-lookin' day, son. By gosh, makes you wish you were out fishin', don't it, son?" And Jack wouldn't look at him. "Yes, Dad." There would follow an awkward silence, broken only by the roar of the motor.

The roar grew steadily louder. The water was like a sea now, brimful and sliding, close up under the clouds. Jack shook his head clear. Something was happening.

The falls! He had forgotten all about the falls. They were the big step down to Lake Surucucu. He would have to make land, carry his equipment. He hadn't got any equipment. That was right, he hadn't. But he would have to make land just the same.

He started to get agitated. The forest lay fifty yards over to his right—but it was all water, all moving. He peered ahead. The world had a rim to it now, a hard, clear rim with nothing on it and nothing beyond it, and the tree was heading straight for it. He knew that nothing he could do would stop it. Beyond that rim, the water dropped in a sheer wall for eight hundred feet.

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Without hesitating to think or weigh up his chances he pulled off his boots and plunged into the current.

Fifty yards. The flood got hold of him, raced him along. He fought himself round and tried to angle across it, swimming with all the concentration and power left in him.

Above the gasp of his own breath, he could hear the falls clearly now—could feel them. They shuddered the air like the sustained bursting of bombs. He stretched out along the water in the fastest, most desperate crawl of his life. Things rammed into him, upsetting his breathing. He shoved his way through them. His mind was shut down, aimed like a gunsight at one thing—survival.

The trees drew nearer. The air shuddered and leapt. His limbs were growing heavier and heavier. He had to roll his whole body to drag one arm up out of the water. His legs were sinking. He was swallowing water fast. He wouldn't give in. Not now. Not ever.

When he hit the driftwood dam he was barely conscious. The flood threw him up onto the driftwood and he lay there, dragging air into his lungs.

It was a long time before he could move. He shook his head liked a knocked-out boxer, and peered around him.

The dam that had saved him had built itself up against the fringe of forest that flanked the very edge of the falls. Beyond the dam, the trees dropped in a matted wall eight hundred feet to the shores of the lake, with the water plunging down through them in thunderous streamers.

One glance told him that he could never reach the lake by land. The whole of the swamp country was brimming over the escarpment and draining down it into the country below. There was only one conceivable way—and he was too weak to make it.

He lay there for a while, outside time, his mind making nonsense of the forenoon. He was beyond the power of decision.

It was with amazement, finally, that he found himself climbing painfully through the branches of the interwoven trees.

There were thorns and ants, but he never felt them, and presently the trees began to slope steeply and he was climbing down a gigantic, crazy ladder, handhold by handhold, clinging on, now in heavy spray, now in the dry, sometimes falling but never far, working on down, with gravity to help him and the tough flood-beards and lianas to catch him and to hold on to.

After a long while he looked down, and there were no more footholds or handholds—only water. He had reached the lake. He dropped into the water like a stone and lay there hugging a piece of wood.

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Through a red haze he saw the plane. It was way out on the lake, float to float with its own reflection. Mr. Hudson was sitting on the wing, looking at his wristwatch and staring all around. Now he had seen him. He was waving.

Jack tried to pull himself together. He felt suddenly for the diamonds. They were not there. He felt right the way round his belt to the back. They were at the back.

He shut his eyes; took a deep breath. "Get a-movin'," he said to himself. "Another hundred yards, boy, and you're home."

But nothing happened. Nothing at all.

He was still mumbling "Get a-movin'," when Mr. Hudson reached him in the plane dinghy.

Four days later when he came round, the old lady who ran the lodging-house he had stayed in the year before called at the hospital. She brought with her a small bundle of mail.

Jack sorted through the letters eagerly. They were all from his family—all but one. Not recognizing the handwriting, he opened it. It was dated a few days before the beginning of his trip.

*Dear Bone*, he read. *I have just heard from your good mother what you are proposing to do. This is madness. It forces me to tell you something that I had intended to keep from you for a few more years. I may be an old fool, but I was never so old or so foolish as to lend your father $2,000. I lent him $20. That day you came to see me I added two zeros to his IOU. I thought it would get you started better than a loan would. It seems I wasn't wrong . . .*

Jack was too amazed to read on. He lay back and stared up at the ceiling—a menagerie of mixed emotions let loose inside him. It was some time before he was calm enough to see that the action had been a good one.

"That was kind of a risky thing to do with a fool kid like me, Doc," he murmured softly. "But I'm glad I didn't let you down."

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*SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144*

Across. 1, *Clamps*. 4, *Victoria*. 8, *Air Force*. 10, *All pat*. 12, *Folio*. 13, *Nonpareil*. 14, *Raise*. 16, *Elopement*. 17, *Saltpetre*. 19, *Baton*. 21, *Drop-scone*. 22, *Be low*. 24, *Catnip*. 25, *Stiletto*. 26, *Runner-up*. 27, *In town*.

Down. 1, *Chaffer*. 2, *April*. 3, *Propose*. 5, *Tillage*. 6, *Represent*. 7, *Astolat*. 9, *Connection*. 11, *Incoherent*. 15, *Ill-gotten*. 17, *Side-car*. 18, *Pastime*. 19, *Babylon*. 20, *New moon*. 23, *Lotto*.

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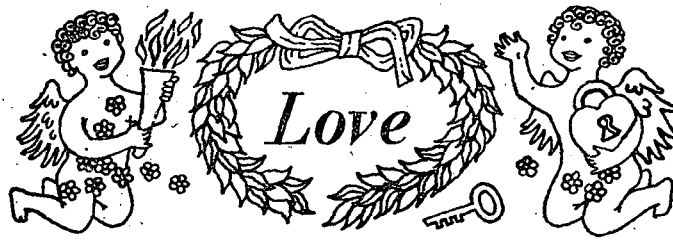


*Speaking of Bluebeard, might it be*
*The story is a pleasantry?*
*What lovely fun! There in the vault*
*The obedient wives—being those at fault—*
*While helped to half the kingdom she*
*Who had the sense to use the key!*

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

## *Gay Bladè*

What would you expect but sex in Vienna? It was protruding under my very nose. This was the way. After my wife had left when I was settled, I gave up a large part of the apartment. One evening when my day at the hospital was done, I noticed the black and yellow uniform on a coachman and a footman who sat on the box seat of an ambling brougham but I paid little attention. On the stairs to my apartment stood a deeply veiled figure. I entered my room. I could hear the sounds of love-making intensely intimate coming from the other room! The lovers spoke English of all tongues—what a language to make love in! This obviously so as not to be understood if the landlady, who had rented the room as a rendezvous, overheard them.

*What they did, who may tell?*
*But I do think 'twas nothing more*
*Than you and I have done before*
*With Bridget and with Nell.*

Not wishing to be an eavesdropper, I went out, and slammed the other door as I went. Inadvertently I had locked the lovers in, for when I returned, darkling, from the Café Clinic at the end of the lane, I found a hole large enough to permit a person passing through cut in the great door. What would all the secrecy and precaution have availed a lady from the palace of K.K. Franz Joseph if a lady in waiting or whatever she was had stayed out all night? Obviously the officer had used his sabre.

OLIVER ST. JOHN GOGARTY

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She went away. I thought I was safe. But not at all. I had hardly put the light out when there came a series of knocks on my door.

"What's the matter?"

"It's me, the manager."

"What do you want?"

"Well, aren't you going to Lisbeth?"

"No, no, I'm tired."

"Ah, but look, she wants you to go to her."

"I don't care a damn!"

"Ah, but *I* do care."

"I've got a headache."

"Don't be such a fool," he cried. "A headache when there's a woman waiting for you!" He raised his voice; he was furious; I became more obstinate . . .

The manager pummelled on the door. "Well," he cried, "the honour of the French Army—does that mean nothing to you? What will the German girls say? That a Frenchman is incapable of making love?"

. . . I put on my dressing-gown and went up to see Lisbeth, who was waiting for me sitting cross-legged like a Turk on her bed. Her hair was all over the place and her rather charming body was clad in a mauve bathing-dress.

MAURICE SACHS, *Day of Wrath: Confessions of a Turbulent Youth*

## *Silver Pin*

*But had I wist, before I kissed,*
*That love had been sae ill to win,*
*I had locked my heart in a case of gowd,*
*And pin'd it with a siller pin.*

*Author Unknown*

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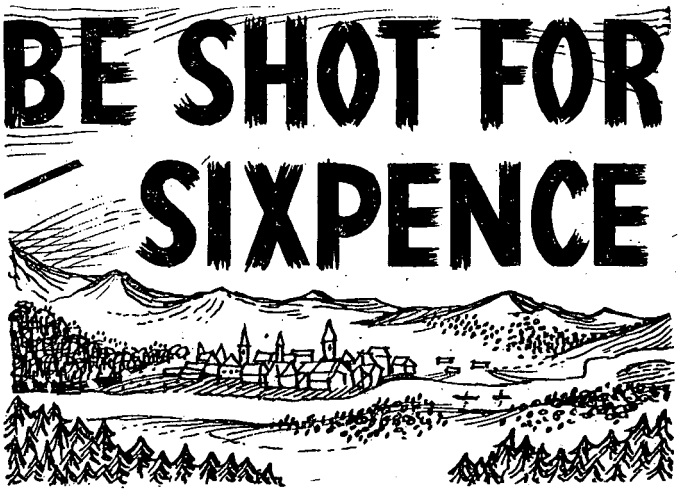
# BE SHOT FOR SIXPENCE



## by MICHAEL GILBERT

THE first thing I saw was the advertisement. It was at the top of the Personal Column and it said: *Attention, Philip. If you want to know the inner story, go to Twickenham and see Henry. Colin.*

It was for all the world as if one of the figures in Madame Tussaud's had stepped smartly from its dais, raised its hat, and addressed me by name. I sat for a few minutes, staring at it in an idiotic way as if I hoped the letters might themselves say something. I even cast my eye down the column to see if there might be anything further addressed to me; but this was the only one. *Attention, Philip . . .*

I went over to the rack where the back numbers of *The Times* were stored. It was in Monday's paper too. I must have been too preoccupied to notice it. Monday was the first time, though. I went back through several weeks to make sure of that. Then I put on my hat and went out quickly.

The commissionaire in the glass hutch at the top of the stairs asked me, with all the courtesy for which this great newspaper is famous, if I would be good enough to wait. He showed me into a cubicle which had the air of an exceptionally well appointed confessional, and said that Mr. Satterley would be along soon.

In due course Mr. Satterley appeared. He was tiny. Smaller even than me, and I am no size at all. A humming-bird of a man.

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**In this nightmare come true, I was playing for stakes beyond my understanding**

Neat, bright, and poised. "You came about an announcement in our Personal Column," he said.

"That's right, it's one which appeared today. Yesterday too, I believe." I took out my copy of the paper and showed it to him.

Mr. Satterley said, "And you are interested in Axminster carpets?"

"Not that one. The one before. The first one in the column."

"Oh yes?"

"I wondered if you could tell me anything about it?"

"There is not usually a great deal to tell," said Mr. Satterley politely. "We usually accept such—er—announcements by post. Provided that they seem to us to be genuine and not objectionable in any way—you'd be surprised how often they contain a 'double entendre'—we really become quite expert at spotting them."

"I don't think this one is a leg-pull," I said.

"No. No. It certainly seemed genuine."

We didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Nevertheless it looked to me as if Mr. Satterley was stalling. He had not said, right out, as he easily could have done, "*This* announcement was sent by post." I felt that the time had come to abandon finesse.

"Do you know anything about the person who put this one in?"

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Satterley, "that I must ask you a question in return. What is your interest in the matter?"

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"I can answer that without any difficulty. I have every reason to suppose that I am the Philip to whom the message is addressed and, if I am right, it was put in by Colin Studd-Thompson."

"Studd-Thompson. Yes."

"Did he come here with it himself?"

"Yes, he did." Mr. Satterley looked at me over his glasses and added, "I knew Mr. Studd-Thompson very well, of course."

I nodded. I was aware of Colin's connection with *The Times*. One of his uncles, or maybe great-uncles, had been a distinguished foreign editor.

"He instructed me that if anyone came to inquire about the advertisement, claiming to be the Philip to whom it was addressed, I was to ask him a question."

"Ask away."

"I was to ask who Henry was."

"That's easy," I said. "Henry is a woman. A charming and accomplished person of uncertain age who was at one time governess to Colin and his brother. Later on she was a governess in our family. We called her Henry because she was the eighth."

"The psychology of young children is a fascinating study," said Mr. Satterley.

He took off his glasses, polished them with little darting movements, replaced them securely on his nose, and said, "How can I help you?"

"I'm not too sure. To start with, it's news to me that Colin has been in England lately."

"I'm afraid that does not follow. This announcement was delivered to us—let me see—more than two months ago. Nearer three."

"Then how did it come to be put in on this particular date?"

"Our instructions were, that if we did *not* hear from Mr. Studd-Thompson by the last day of any week, we were to insert the announcement during the whole of the week following."

In silence I tried to think this out. Silence so absolute that I could suddenly hear the voice of a woman speaking quite shrilly two rooms away. She was accepting an announcement for the Births Column and seemed to be making heavy going of it.

"I take it, then," I said at last, "that when he failed to get through to you—"

"We heard from him regularly for nine weeks."

"So you know where he is—or was?"

"I'm afraid not. The messages were sent through our foreign correspondents. The last three came from Rome—but that does not mean that Mr. Studd-Thompson was necessarily in Italy."

"I see. And last Friday—or Saturday—you got no message at all?"

"That is correct."

"It may have been delayed."

"Possibly. Our messages are not often delayed. And in any event our instructions were categoric. If we had not heard by

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midnight on Saturday, the announcement had to be inserted on Monday—and for the five days following."

"*G-o-t-t-*" said the shrill voice.

"It is really rather a remarkable circumstance," went on Mr. Satterley. "Owing to the peculiar way in which this matter has been arranged, you are probably the only person in England who is in a position to find out exactly what has happened to Mr. Studd-Thompson."

"*—f-r-i-e-d. That's right. As in fried bread.*"

"Yes," I said. "Well, I'm very much obliged to you."

I walked back slowly, and rather blindly, along the Embankment. My feet took me into the little garden by Temple Station. I settled my body carefully down on a seat facing the Embankment and allowed my mind to drift backwards for ten, for twenty, for thirty years . . .

Myself as a new boy at a preparatory school on the South Coast. Colin had been the first person to speak to me. He had spoken with the patronage demanded by his superior position—for he had already been at the school for a whole term—but he had spoken kindly. Soon we were friends. I cannot remember how soon, for no doubt Colin had his dignity to consider and I was remarkably unsociable, even as a boy; but friends we became.

It proved to be almost the only genuine, lasting friendship of my life, and I have no doubt that psychologists would have given themselves headaches trying to explain it. There wasn't an ounce of sentiment in it; or, if a little of this necessary lubricant must be present, then no more than the barest drop. I think the truth is that we suited each other, like two old clubmen who enjoy each other's company on the basis that they will respect each other's foibles and listen charitably to each other's reminiscences.

We went to different public schools and to different universities, and saw, of course, a good deal less of each other thereafter. But whenever we did meet we seemed to pick up matters exactly where we had laid them down. Only a few months ago, happening to be walking through the Middle Temple, I heard a bland voice behind me saying, "The building is eighteenth century, and shockingly proportioned, but the foundation is four centuries older," and I knew, without looking round, that Colin was back in England.

It had always been like that. The middle of the long vacation. A ring at the doorbell. Colin's gentle voice, so curiously at variance with his craggy face: "You must come along, Philip. Such an interesting little man. A Lithuanian. His mother was murdered by the White Russians and his father starved to death under the Red sort—I rode *all* round London yesterday with him on the top of a bus."

It was all very well for Colin. He was reading modern languages—and already spoke half a dozen of them with alarming fluency. I should have been as tongue-tied with his Lithuanian as his Lithuanian would have been bored with me.

Colin gravitated naturally to the Diplomatic and I knew that

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he had served spells at Belgrade and Budapest, and had been in Germany so late in August 1939 that he had finally been forced to quit it, in the early hours of the morning and on foot, at Singen. During the war he had been withdrawn from regular work and I should have known, if I had not been too busy to spare it a thought, that he must have been with Intelligence. His background and proclivities made it a certainty.

I got to my feet and walked slowly down the garden. I needed the incentive of movement to get my brain working. Like an old car on a cold morning, it works quite well, but I have to start it off down a slope.

My strongest feeling, and I must confess it now, was a very marked disinclination to interfere. Colin had clearly got himself involved in some business inside the troubled perimeter of Europe, and it must be business with an Intelligence slant to it.

To the man in the street, who knows absolutely nothing about it, the notion of Intelligence is a not unpleasant one. I know very little more than the man in the street, but certain of my wartime experiences, which I shall mention in their proper place, had made me wary.

Though far from realizing exactly what went on behind the discreet façade of those offices in Sloane Square and Buckingham Palace Road, I was past the honeymoon stage of my acquaintanceship with the Secret Service.

However, there was no need to commit myself yet. The first step was clearly marked. Since I alone knew who Henry was, I must go and see Henry. That would be a pleasure. I had been meaning to look her up for some time. When I had heard what she had to say would be the time to make my mind up about the next move. That settled, I again got to my feet.

A little man with a long nose got up from the seat next to me and moved off in the opposite direction.

I started out for Twickenham after lunch, and I went on foot. I enjoy walking and am not one of those who have to put on fancy dress and go all the way to Teviotdale or Exmoor before I can enjoy myself. I find that a fairly fast rate suits me. With a detour across the rough in Richmond Park I covered ten miles in well under two hours. Green Gables, Barkas Road, is on the outskirts of Twickenham. It is a nice little house, in a road of nice little houses. I know what it cost because six of us clubbed together to buy it for Henry when she retired. That was before the war. It would have cost us a great deal more now.

Henry opened the door. She was a neat, spare, fierce figure, with the upright bearing which, in this decadent age, is attributed only to royalty.

"I've walked down to see you," I said.

"You've walked! All the way from London?"

"It's not very far."

"You're sure you haven't walked yourself into a damp sweat?"

"I'm not sweating at all," I said indignantly.

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" I could lend you a dressing-gown."

" No, really. I'm as dry as a bone. I hardly hurried at all."

" You're always in a hurry." She laid her old hand inside my coat, over my heart. " I'll let it go this time. Come in."

We went into the back room, which looked through french windows onto a square of garden. It was as neat as any room could be which contained—I once counted them—forty-eight framed and six unframed photographs. Most of them were boys and young men. Boys in shorts and sweaters and blazers and school caps, and young men in blazers and sweaters and shorts—and in the dress and undress uniform of a dozen different regiments of Foot Guards, Lancers, and Hussars.

" How did last winter go? " I asked, as I settled carefully down in one of her high-backed chairs. (" Don't slouch, Master Philip. It weakens the spine.")

" Terrible," said Henry. " France and Ireland were here. Neither of them good matches. No Calcutta Cup and no Welsh match. That's the match I like. Right from the start. You should see the little men in cloth caps run out and tie the leeks onto the cross-bars, and the policemen chase them."

I agreed that the Welsh match was fun. " But still, you had the seven-a-sides."

" I expect it was Colin you came to talk about," said Henry suddenly. " Rugger's not really your game. You might have made a scrum half if you'd been a bit wider in the hips."

" I expect that's because I didn't always sit up straight at table," I said. " Yes, it was about Colin."

" Have the advertisements started? "

" They started yesterday."

Henry looked steadily at me, but said nothing. If I hadn't been sure before, I knew now that Colin was her real favourite.

" Show it to me," she said. I took the cutting out of my pocket. She read it carefully. Her old eyes scorned spectacles.

" A pity," was all she said.

" I expect you'd better tell me what he said."

" It was four months ago. I'd just got back from watching the Harlequins play Oxford, and I found him waiting on my doorstep. He looked a little fatter than usual, but otherwise just the same. He never changes."

I nodded. Colin's craggy face settled into its adult mould when he was about fifteen and has remained practically unchanged since.

" Whilst I was boiling the kettle for tea he told me what he'd been up to. ' You're quite right, Henry,' he said, ' I *am* getting fat. It's because I do nothing but sit still, in a fairy palace, waiting for something to happen. It's quite exciting, but it doesn't alter the fact that I have to do a lot of sitting still, and too much eating, and too much drinking.'

" Then, when we were having tea, he told me something else. I can't remember it exactly—not word for word—but what he said was this: ' It's not my show. I'm only in it as a guest artist,

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I've got no standing at all. And it's so secret that I don't suppose there's anything more secret in the world today. That's why I'm telling you as little as I can.' "

Henry broke off and gave one of her dry laughs. " You know why he said that to me? Once, when he was very small, he came along to me and said, ' I know a tremendous secret, Henry. I'll tell it you if you like,' and I said, ' Certainly not. If it's a secret, you mustn't tell anyone.' He was terribly deflated, but he hadn't forgotten it. Have another crumpet? "

" I oughtn't to," I said, " but I will."

" You take as much interest in your figure as a ballerina. Well, then he told me about the advertisement. ' I've got to do it just that way,' he said, ' because that way doesn't leave any possible line that anyone else in the world can follow up. I told you, it isn't my secret. That's why I've got to be so careful.' ' Supposing he doesn't see it? ' I said. ' That's a chance I've got to take,' said Colin. ' But it's not a serious one. I'll let it run for a week. It'll catch his eye all right.' And so it did."

" So it did," I said. " What message did he leave? "

" You're to go to Cologne, and walk across the Hohenzollern Bridge. Be in the middle of the bridge, leaning over the parapet, looking down-river at nine o'clock in the morning . . ."

Immediately after breakfast next day I put on my hat and walked out of the Club, down the steps by the Duke of York's column, and along into Green Park. I walked quite slowly and I didn't trouble to look behind me. I was pretty certain I would be followed.

He was new to the job, I thought. He looked like a retired sergeant-major and clamoured for attention. When I moved, he moved ten paces behind me. When I sat down, he did likewise. As soon as I was sure of him I walked over and sat down beside him.

" At ease," I said. " I'd like a word with you."

" I'm afraid—"

" Let's not worry about all that. All I want from you is some information."

" Who—"

" I want to see your boss in the—what would it be—Foreign Office? Technically, I suppose I could go and ring the front-door bell and ask for the Foreign Secretary, but I feel sure that I should only be shunted from department to department, and waste the whole morning. What I want from you is the name and room number of the man who's interested in my case."

" I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

" Then you're just not trying," I said. " If you won't let me have the name I'm going to call that policeman and report you for molesting me. You won't get a bouquet from M.I.5 for that."

I saw doubt in his eye. " Really, sir. I can't—"

" Just the name."

" It's most irregular! " The policeman was approaching slowly.

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" You might find that Captain Forestier was the man you wanted."

" Where does he hang out? "

" Sloane Square."

" I'm obliged to you," I said. I got up, made my way into Piccadilly, and caught a bus. The sergeant-major was still devotedly following me. He got onto the same bus and went upstairs—standard technique Number One, for lulling your quarry's suspicions. I felt that the least I could do was to pay his fare, and I did so.

The building in Sloane Square looked like all other small office blocks. There were the plates of a number of professional firms and a porter in a hutch reading the continental edition of the *Daily Mail*. " I want to see a Captain Forestier," I said.

He nodded. " You take the lift to the fourth, then you've got to walk."

" I expect I can manage one floor," I said.

I got out of the lift onto the fourth-storey landing, which was close-carpeted. On my left was a narrow flight of stairs, covered with new brown linoleum. I went up the stairs, and through a swing door which said *Enter*.

At the table, thumbing severely through a telephone directory, was a very young lady with brown hair, a tip-tilted nose, and a mouth full of lovely toothpaste-advertisement teeth. The newspaper she had been reading before she heard me coming was inaccurately hidden behind her chair.

" Yes? " she said invitingly.

" Yes, indeed," I said. " I mean, I wanted to see Captain Forestier."

" Had you an appointment? "

" Half past ten. I'm afraid I'm a few minutes late."

She started off gaily towards one of the doors, then frowned, and came back, and said, " I'm always forgetting things. I should have asked your name."

" I have no name," I said severely. " Only a number."

Her great saucer eyes grew even larger. If she'd actually been a kitten, that would have been the moment I would have picked her up and given her stomach a little tickle.

" 97258. And it won't have escaped your notice that it's a number divisible by seven. That means that I have killed a man with my bare hands."

A shade of doubt clouded her face. She walked away, as haughtily as a girl of her build can walk, and knocked at one of the doors. A crisp voice said, " Come in." She went in; the door shut. Almost at once it opened again. She was furious. It made her look even more like a kitten.

Before she could start I said, " He doesn't know me. All right. Tell him it's about an advertisement in *The Times*. Go on. Go on. He can't bite you."

She looked doubtful, opened the door again, went in. More voices. Quite a lot of talk. Then she reappeared.

" Don't tell me," I said. " Now he *does* want to see me." As

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I went past her the temptation to tickle her became almost overmastering. I mastered it and walked in.

Captain Forestier got up as I came in. He did not come forward and shake hands, nor did he offer me an easy chair. Not a chummy sort of man, I suspected. He had a brick-red face under startlingly light reddish hair, and light blue eyes. He was in mufti, but I am quite certain that his medal ribbons would have stretched from here to there.

"Well?" It was a voice which had made roomfuls of recruits jump to attention.

"What about asking me to sit down?" I said.

He never batted an eyelid. "I'll ask you to sit down when I think you've got anything to say to me."

"Don't be silly," I said. There was only one spare chair in the room, so I annexed it. "If you hadn't thought that I might have something to say to you, you'd never have let me in. Little Pussykin would have told a white lie and said you were in conference."

He flexed himself once or twice on the balls of his feet, like an athlete who's about to go for a standing jump record, and said, "I'll give you three minutes."

I resisted the temptation to say, "You'll give me just as long as it takes." There was no sense in annoying him unnecessarily. I said, "I'm Philip."

"I see." The Captain lowered himself very cautiously into his chair, as if he expected it to bite him, and said, in a very slightly less aggressive voice, "Good of you to come round. Incidentally, why here?"

"I asked your bloodhound."

"And he told you?"

"Under duress. I threatened to report him for molesting me."

"And was he?"

"Not actually molesting, no. But he's been following me about all this morning. Now suppose you tell me what it's all about."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," said Captain Forestier seriously.

I controlled myself. "Is Studd-Thompson officially involved?"

"No. And even if he had been—"

"You could trust him, but you can't trust me. Is that it?"

"Since you put it so bluntly. Yes. He knows the ropes."

"And this is something pretty confidential?"

He looked at me as if he hardly believed in my existence. Then he said, "You don't know a lot about this sort of thing, do you?"

"I did get mixed up in it once," I said. "Not enough to teach me anything, except to dislike it."

He said in a much more friendly voice, "The real trouble is, no one ever tells anyone else the truth about anything. You get a project—" he laid his big hand on the table; the fur on the back of it was like a fox's pelt—"say four people know about it. It might be two in the Pentagon and two in Whitehall. But when they start to work it out they've got to tell other people. So they

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tell them a story. Not the truth. They bring in other people; and the other people get told a second story. And so on. Even by the time *I* get it, it's probably been wrapped up three or four times." His fingers picked up a glass-backed hand blotter, which was lying north and south on his desk, and turned it accurately through ninety degrees so that it lay east and west.

"And which story does Colin know?"

"I hope," he said seriously, "that he doesn't know the truth."

"Because that would make him vulnerable?"

He just looked at me. "And that's why—wherever he's got to—you don't want me blundering about after him?"

"I'll go further than that. You're a sensible chap. You wouldn't have come along here if you hadn't been sensible. So I can tell it to you right out. You mustn't interfere. No question of discretion. You just mustn't do it. It's forbidden."

"What happens," I said, breathing a bit harder, "if I refuse to recognize your right to give me orders?"

"Oh, I don't suppose it will come to that."

"But answer my question. What are you going to do? Imprison me in the Tower?"

"Might do. It's a bit crowded at the moment."

"All right," I said. I climbed out of the chair.

Captain Forestier got up too. He had his back to the light and I found it hard to read the expression on his face. He said, "I judge you to be an obstinate man. Don't go rushing into this simply because you've been told not to. Of all the silly reasons for doing a thing, I should think that would be about the silliest."

"I'll bear it in mind," I said, and left him.

Next morning I rang up my office from a call box, and dictated a letter over the telephone to my secretary. It was a letter that I wanted sent straight away to an engineering firm in Brussels who were very closely connected with us in business. They were not exactly a subsidiary, but we honoured each other's cheques. Then, I spoke to my partner. "Everything's under control," he said. "If you're thinking of this business trip, why don't you help yourself to a holiday while you're over there?" "I'll think about it," I said. It was quite true, everything was under control, and I could easily take myself off.

In the afternoon I went for a quiet walk, and when I was quite certain that no one could be following me I hailed a taxi and drove to a small booking-agent's near Victoria. I had made use of their services before and was well known to them. The man behind the counter looked slightly surprised at my request. "I didn't know you were interested in cathedrals, Major," he said.

"Passionately."

"It'll be mostly old women."

"Next to cathedrals I like old women best."

"It's your life," he said. "Forty bob with lunch, tea, and tips."

I paid him in notes and, returning to my Club, spent the evening losing money in a hot bridge school. That was Wednesday.

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Thursday dawned bright and fair. I rose early, put on the sort of suit that men-about-town wear when they are going out of town for the day, and had a hearty breakfast. After breakfast I cashed a fair-sized cheque at the Club desk—I had been careful not to go near my bank since my interview with Captain Forestier.

I don't think I was followed that morning. However, I didn't take any chances. It cost me sixty minutes and five changes to reach Buckingham Palace Road, but when I got to Victoria I was sure that I was on my own. And there she was; drawn up at the kerb. A handsome yellow twenty-four-seater. A placard in front said: *Know Your Cathedrals.* And a card in the slot said: *Today's Trip: Canterbury.* A hatchet-faced man was standing with his head out of the open top, and there were twenty-three people already seated. The booking-agent had been perfectly right. They were all women.

We got to Canterbury in time for lunch. It was a lovely drive.

Before we went in to lunch I had a word with the hatchet-faced organizer, and told him that I had friends in Canterbury who might be putting me up for the night. Not to worry if I wasn't there when the bus started. He promised not to worry. He looked like a man who didn't worry much.

There was a local train from Canterbury to Dover that left shortly after two. It was going to mean cutting it a bit fine the other end, but at least it gave me plenty of time in Canterbury to do my shopping before lunch.

I decided that a suitcase looked more respectable than a rucksack. I'd have liked to get a second-hand one, but that proved impossible. So I compromised with a large, cheap, fibre job. I reckoned if I banged it about a bit it wouldn't look too glaringly new. Then I fitted myself out with some shorts and pyjamas and underclothes and shaving-gear and things of that sort. I had brought my sponge-bag with me in my pocket, and that, at any rate, looked authentically old and used. I was lucky enough to pick up a second-hand tweed jacket at a little shop in a street behind the market.

I unfolded and refolded everything a few times. Most of the stuff still looked rather new, but it would have to do.

The train was late and I got out at Dover Priory Station with barely twenty minutes in hand. Luckily there was a taxi waiting and it scooted me downhill to the Marine Station. I hurried across the footbridge, and onto the platform. The tail end of the queue from the boat train was still moving. I tacked myself onto it.

I had my boat ticket. The office had got it for me from an ordinary travel agency three days before. Passport stamped. Customs. Everyone in a hurry. Nobody really looked at anything. No questions. The policeman at the turnstile gave me the curious, ruminative stare which policemen always give you when they are thinking of something else.

The gangways came up. The ship's hooter let out a mournful blast, and I sank into a deck-chair. We swung away, stern first, from the quay.

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"Tea in the saloon," said the white-coated waiter.

"The sea looks smooth," I said.

"Of the smoothest," said the waiter. I was glad of that. I am no sailor.

Before the war you used to reach Cologne on this route at midnight. The new Saphir-Express will get you there in time for dinner. However, I had one important call to make, so I stepped off at Brussels, where I spent an uncomfortable night at a second-class hotel in the quarter behind the station. I was fairly certain that I had made a clean getaway but there was no sense in taking unnecessary risks.

In the morning I called on our Brussels associates to pick up the money I had asked for, most of it in German marks, and by lunch-time I was in Cologne.

I had the afternoon to kill, so I walked about a bit before choosing a hotel. The König seemed about my mark. It was a modest place, with only half a dozen bedrooms, and a big downstairs bar with a tiled stove, a zinc counter with a beer engine, and a few well-scrubbed tables.

I had my evening meal there, saw a very bad film, and slept like a log.

I had asked to be called at seven, and by half past eight I had breakfasted and paid my bill. I told the proprietor that I was not certain whether I should be staying another night, but if he was agreeable, perhaps I might leave my luggage with him until I had made my plans.

This was a mistake, but not one I could have foreseen.

A minute later I was in the street, heading for the Rhine. It was a lovely morning. A brisk breeze was packing away the clouds and snapping the flags. The customary Trade Fair was in progress and Cologne was full of flags. Even the grim, battered stump of the Cathedral had life and colour that morning.

My watch said seven minutes to nine as I set foot on the Hohenzollern bridge. It was built for the railway, but it carries, as a sort of afterthought, a side walk, outside the main structure, for bicyclists and pedestrians.

I had no difficulty in finding the exact place. The bridge is hung on three suspension arches, and the middle one has seventeen uprights. By any mathematics the ninth upright must be the middle.

I reached it with two minutes to spare, turned my back on the bridge, and leaned over the iron parapet.

A tug was fussing upstream, pulling a line of three barges. A pleasure steamer, its top deck almost empty, swung away from the landing-stage, the band playing. Half a dozen clocks together started to chime the hour of nine.

Nothing else happened.

Looking out of the corner of my eye, I totted up the score. An elderly German and his wife were walking towards me on the footway. They looked as ordinary as bread and butter. A small boy

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in leather shorts was coming the other way at a trot. A pair of blue-uniformed bicyclists appeared from the Cathedral end and pedalled slowly towards me and past me. As they caught the gradient they put on speed a little, and disappeared.

It was nearly five past nine. A workman on a bicycle appeared at the west end. My instructions had been quite precise. It was beyond possibility that Henry should have made a mistake. I would stay until a quarter past nine, and then try again next day.

The workman jumped off his bicycle, propped it against the rail, and leaned beside me. He had a small brown face like a friendly monkey. "I take it you are Philip," he said.

"That's right."

"Who did you get the message from?"

"Henry," I said cautiously.

"All right, all right," he said. "No time for fencing. I'm sorry I'm late. I was damn nearly arrested this morning."

I expect I looked alarmed.

"Nothing to do with this business. Nothing at all. My own private life catching up with me. I'm doing this to oblige a friend. Every morning I come over on my way to work. It's quite easy. When I saw that you were waiting for me, I stopped."

"How did you know I was waiting for you?"

"How did I know? It was obvious. But never mind that." He glanced quickly over his shoulder, to left and right.

"You are to go to the Schloss Obersteinbrückl. That is all I know. Now good-bye, and good luck."

"But where is it?"

"Above Steinbrückl—as the name implies."

"And where is Steinbrückl?"

"Good heavens," said the little man, "how should I know! Somewhere in Austria. You'll find it on the map." He grabbed hold of his bicycle.

"Just a moment. When did you see Herr Studd-Thompson? Was he well? How long ago did he give you this message?"

"It was—let me see—two months. Perhaps more. Yes, he seemed very well."

"And you have come past here every morning for the last two months?"

"That is so. He did me a good turn, you see. A very good turn. Stolen goods, the police said. Of course, it was a put-up job. You understand?"

"I understand nothing—"

"That's right. That's quite right. Never understand a thing, then you can come to no harm. I must go now."

He hopped onto his bicycle and pedalled off. As he reached the far end a car drew out from where it had been waiting behind the buttress of the bridge. It quite blocked the footway.

I saw the bicycle wobble, then it straightened, and the rider hopped off. I thought for a moment he was going to run for it. But the two men who had got out of the car closed up on him.

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I turned and walked fast in the other direction

At the west end of the bridge another car was stationed. The driver was at the wheel; beside him another man with horn-rimmed glasses and a wide mouth like a fish. Neither of them moved as I came up. I passed behind the car, clattered down the steps, and walked off along the promenade. My heart was beating a little faster.

First I wanted to get off that promenade. It was too long and too straight and was commanded at both ends: behind by the Hohenzollern Bridge which I had just left, and in front by the new Köln-Deutzer Bridge.

On my left I had been conscious for some minutes of a looming white building. It turned out, when I got up to it, to be the Rheinisches-und-Historisches Museum. I bought a ticket off a snuffy old relic of the Franco-Prussian war and dived into shelter. Actually, it was rather a nice museum, full of suits of armour, and engines of war, and gigantic panoramas of the Rhine, and a Vincenzo Coronelli globe from the Gymnasium Tricoronatum which, at any other time, I'd happily have spent the morning with. At that moment my mind was too occupied with the present to give due attention to the glories of the Rhenish past.

The rooms were almost empty. I sat myself down quietly on a seat behind a glass case of ladies' Sunday clothes, and listened. Ahead of me was the slow tip-tap of footsteps. They belonged to a little man who had come in just before me. In the silence I could follow his pottering progress from room to room. The only other sound was from the lobby where the custodian wheezed and coughed and occasionally rattled his cash-box as if to assure himself that it was still with him.

Presently I heard the outer door open. Two more visitors. I sat tight. I was almost out of sight, but had a fair view of the room between the sequin-covered bodices. This time it was two men, neither of whom I had seen before. They advanced steadily, wheeled to the right, and disappeared into the adjoining room. They didn't seem to be taking a great deal of interest in the history of the Rhine, either.

As soon as they were gone I got to my feet, blessing my rubber-soled shoes, and moved back the way I had come. The custodian seemed surprised to see me.

"It is forbidden to circulate in an against-the-clock direction," he said.

"An urgent appointment," I said firmly, vaulted the entrance turnstile, and trotted down the first steps. The custodian sat looking sourly after me. I had probably upset his calculations for the day.

Outside, a police car was parked against the kerb. The driver looked worried when he saw me. His instructions had evidently not covered this contingency. I ignored him, and ran along the embankment. After all, it was no crime to run, even in Germany.

The driver had an inspiration and started to sound his horn.

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A stairway on the left. Just what I wanted. At the bottom an alleyway, and at the end of that another. Keep to the alleys. Cats can move in alleys. Cars can't.

There's a comfortably confusing network of alleys west of the Rhine at that point, and it was a full quarter of a mile before I broke out into the Ring-Strassen and immediately jumped on a tram. I had no idea where it was going. The main point was that it was crowded, and moving. It made a swaying, jolting detour round most of the western suburbs of Cologne and finally dropped me at the Main Station.

The sweat was dry on me, and I was beginning to think. I went into the station buffet and bought myself a coffee. What had happened was now reasonably clear to me. The little man on the bridge had spoken the truth when he had said that his private life was catching up with him. It was catching up with me too. He was clearly a professional criminal. That the only reliable messenger in Cologne known to Colin should be a professional criminal was a piece of bad luck. That the police should have been planning to pull him in that morning was worse. When they saw him stop and talk to me I became an object of suspicion, too; and no wonder.

Were they still on my tail? It is easy to imagine you are being followed, but in this case I thought not. They would have had to be exceptionally quick and lucky to have picked me up as I came out of that maze of alleyways; and they would have needed a car at the exact spot to follow the tram.

Suppose for the moment I was all right. There were two flies in the ointment. The first was that I was too clearly a foreigner. The men in the car at the far end of the bridge had seen me closely enough to be sure about that. They may even have been able to identify me as an Englishman. The other thing was that I had a very healthy admiration for the German control of hotels. Registration was no mere formality, as it is in England. It was an efficient system designed to keep tabs on all strangers. It worked. I knew; I had had some before.

Regretfully I bade farewell to a suitcase full of new clothes, paid for my coffee, and made my way out. I knew just what I wanted. There is a large new department store on the Bendler Strasse, which specializes in men's clothes. Also it has dressing-rooms.

When I came out in half an hour's time I was wearing—starting from the bottom—brogue flap-tongue shoes, white knitted stockings, cut-away leather shorts, a checked shirt, a bumfreezer jacket, and a rather saucy Tyrolean hat with a synthetic badger's tail in the turned-up brim. My own clothes were packed into the rucksack on my back. I carried a stick with a hartshorn handle.

I wondered for a moment if I had overdone it, but my fears were quickly dispelled. No one spared me a glance. The Germans, like the Americans, take kindly to fancy dress. Indeed, to wear a uniform of any sort is to classify yourself, and the Germans are nuts on classification. Organize yourself, organize your country, organize the world. Bless their orderly little hearts.

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I bought a third-class ticket for Baden which was in the right direction and seemed a logical place for a hiker to go to. I was in no particular hurry. It was Saturday. It was summer. The Continent was in front of me.

Late on Monday morning, after five more changes of train and a change of clothes, I saw Steinbrückl for the first time.

We had left Graz at dawn. East of Völkermarkt the train pulls out of the plain and drags itself up for a few miles into the foothills. This small amount of extra height gave depth and meaning to the scene. From then on it was a journey of enchantment.

*I studied the large-scale map I had bought in Klagenfurt.*

Steinbrückl is an outpost. It sprawls between the foothills and the Raab, its frontage the river, its backcloth the magnificent semi-circle of purple mountain which delimits the borders and meeting-place of the ancient kingdoms of Hungary and Austria with the infant Republic of Yugoslavia.

The mountains to the south had on their summer dress, laced along their lower slopes with the green of vineyards. But there was snow on the high tops and in the corries.

As the train swung round a bend I was able to pick out the Klein Oos and to follow its wandering course upwards. First through a cluster of red roofs which must mark the village of Kleinoosberg. Then up and up again, into the pine trees until—yes, there it was—topping the highest tree, built onto and into its pinnacle crag—the Schloss Obersteinbrückl.

I could see what Colin meant when he called it a fairy palace. Without doubt Snow White had lived there. The Sleeping Beauty had lain in its tower-room, and wolves still howled through the dark forest at its foot.

The train gave a derisive hoot, swung south again, and snorted down towards the town. *I got out into the sunshine.*

A long straight avenue, bordered with plane trees, leads from the station to the town. Obersteinbrückl is a relic from another age, an Edwardian German spa, decayed but unchanged. There was the Kurhaus; there the mineral-water fountain; there the tea-garden. The covered stand for the orchestra. The concert room; the Tissich-haus and the Schlossgarten, their plaster flaking, their paint peeling, but still indomitably committed to the rigours of holiday-making.

I walked down a green *allèe* towards the central square. One side of it was formed by the Casino. It did not look like a place where play would be high. More space would be given to family games of dreissig-vierzig than to baccarat. The pillars of the portico were cracked, and along the front stood orange trees in tubs. To the right, the road runs up the foothills; to the left, down to the river—*To the Island of Pleasure*, says a notice-board, *Season Tickets, or by the day.*

An air of solid, contented melancholy sits on the place, like a veil on the face of an elderly nun.

I went into the nearest espresso and ordered coffee. It took a

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long time to come. Nothing moves fast in Steinbrückl. I looked again at my map. The castle was three or four miles from the town, and more than a thousand feet above it. I sought out a garage and hired myself a car.

I have no recollection of the drive. My mind was ahead of me. Would Colin be there? What was it all about? Why had he stretched out this thread across Europe? It was a thin thread, tenuous and easily broken, but a twitch on it had been enough to bring me running.

We ground up the final ascent and pulled to a stop, steam jetting from our radiator, before an iron-studded door let into the living rock. The driver hooted. A huge dog, lying in the sun, scratched itself. The driver climbed out and pulled at a bell.

For a long time nothing happened. Then, quickly and surprisingly quietly, the door opened. A tiny man, in some sort of livery, peered politely out.

The moment had arrived.

I took a sealed envelope from my pocket—it contained the original cutting from *The Times*—and handed it without a word to the gnome.

He looked me quickly up and down, then said in German, "Would you like to wait inside?"

I said yes to that, and paid off the car, which made a shuddering turn and started coasting back down the hill. I reckoned he wouldn't have to use his engine until he got back to the outskirts of the town.

I turned and followed my guide up a sloping cobbled passage and out into the courtyard at the end of it.

From the inner courtyard the size of the place became more apparent. Colin had been accurate in the description he had given Henry. It was a palace, not a castle.

I am not good at buildings, but I shouldn't have said that it was much more than a hundred or maybe a hundred and fifty years old. Something older may very likely have been pulled down to make room for it. The fortresslike outer keep suggested a more ancient past. The inner portion looked like a hotel designed by an architect with delusions of grandeur.

I was shown into a small room on the left of the entrance portico, which might have been labelled *Reception*. When the door opened I think I half expected a hall porter in uniform.

Instead, it was Lisa!

"Phee-leep," she said—said is a most inadequate word: Lisa screams like a seagull when she is excited. She came skimming over and gave me a peck on the cheek.

Considering that it was thirteen years since I had set eyes on her, she was very little changed. Somewhat sharper, a bit more angular, less ingenuous, more experienced, but the same darting eyes and wide mouth.

"This is a nice surprise," I said sincerely. "Or were you expecting me perhaps?"

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"The last man in the world."

"Lisa, be truthful."

"Quite, quite truthful. When August came and said to me, 'There is a visitor—an Englishman, I think,' I had no idea. It might have been General Montgomery—"

"What a let-down," I said, "when it was only me."

Lisa said, "Well, it was rather. But how nice that it should have been just you and no one else."

"Is Colin here?"

"Well—no."

Something cold settled on my heart. "How long is it since you have seen him?"

"Would you like to come and talk to the boss?"

"In a minute. How long since you saw Colin?"

"Philip! Two minutes and you start to bully."

"I'm not bullying. But I've come a long way to meet him, and I want to know."

"Today it is Monday. Last Monday was a week ago. Then another week. Then four days before that."

"He was here a fortnight ago last Thursday, then?"

"That is right. A fortnight back from last Thursday. Come along now."

"Has anyone heard from him since he left?"

"I do not know. Perhaps. Lady will tell you."

"Lady?"

"Ferenc Lady. He is the leader here. Did you not know?"

"I know nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing."

As we walked towards the door Lisa gave my hand a little squeeze. We climbed together the broad stairs which led from the hall to the first-floor landing. Facing us was a double door of carved, unpainted lime wood. Lisa went in without knocking and I followed. It was a big ante-room. A young man with a pale face, and sad eyes behind thick, horn-rimmed glasses, sat at a desk. He was snipping a paragraph from a newspaper and pasting it into a giant scrapbook. A pile of mutilated paper lay on the floor behind him. He looked politely at us.

"Gheorge," said Lisa. "This is Philip."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Philips."

"Well—actually Philip—"

"Mr. Philip."

I gave it up.

"This is Gheorge Ossudsky. He is Ferenc Lady's private secretary—and watchdog."

Gheorge said seriously, "You overrate my capabilities, Lisa. And why should Lady need a watchdog? He is well able to watch after himself."

"Is the great man busy?"

"I do not think so. Perhaps I will go in and ask."

"If you ask him, of course he'll say he's busy. Just announce Philip. Say that he has come from England with a message."

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"Hey—" I said.

"That is all right. You want to talk to him, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," I said weakly.

Gheorge disappeared. There was a murmur of voices behind the partition. He reappeared and beckoned. Lisa gave my arm another little squeeze. I recognized it. It was just the sort of squeeze my mother used to give me before I walked into the dentist's surgery.

The inner room was small, but well proportioned. A drawing-room in the original scheme of things, I guessed, but the original furniture and carpets had been turned out and replaced by a desk, a conference table, and a number of chairs. On the walls, where the pictures and tapestries had once hung, were maps—huge maps in thick relief and in bold colour; the sort of maps which my mind associated with a military headquarters.

Ferenc Lady had got up from behind the desk as I came in. My first reaction was plain surprise; my next, something akin to dismay. It was the build-up that was to blame. I had been expecting a pocket Mussolini. What I saw was a small, petulant-looking gentleman wearing one of the most terrible drape jackets I have ever seen off the West End stage. His small-featured, sallow face would have been good-looking, if he had not been so obviously irritated. I judged him to be as young or younger than me.

"Do I know you?"

He was, as I discovered afterwards, trilingual. On this occasion he spoke in his native Hungarian. I answered him in the same tongue.

"I am afraid you do not. But the score is level, because until five minutes ago I had no idea you existed, either."

His teeth flashed in a smile of pure ill-humour. "Perhaps you would like to sit down and tell me about yourself?"

As he jerked his head, a little waft of something-or-other-of-violets reached me. I felt sure I was going to love him.

"When did you learn to speak Hungarian?"

"During the war. I spent a year in Hungary."

"A spy?"

"Certainly not. An escaping prisoner of war."

"You are not very fluent. Your vowel sounds are too thick and you use the English word-order. A Hungarian would say 'A year spent I in Hungary.'"

"Would you prefer to talk in English?"

"As you like."

He switched smoothly into English. There was a touch of Belsize Park about it, but he was perfectly fluent and even colloquial.

"What brings you here?"

I told him about Colin Studd-Thompson and the advertisement. It didn't sound terribly convincing, but I've often found that's the way with the truth. It never sounds quite as reasonable as a good, logical, well-constructed lie.

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Lady listened in silence. The only animation he showed was when I told him about my contact in Cologne getting picked up by the police. He made me describe the man again; then the details of his arrest.

"How did you know they were police?"

"All police look alike," I said. "It's a sort of beefy, stolid, holier-than-thou look. Once seen never forgotten."

"I think perhaps you jump to conclusions," he said. "Tell me again about Studd-Thompson. A childhood friendship, you say?"

"That's right. We used to cry each other to sleep every night at school."

"Really," he said. "That sounds improbable."

I saw, then, that it was no use trying to pull his leg. His skin was about two inches thick and satire-proof.

"And apart from this fortuitous friendship, you have no connection with our enterprise here?"

"I'm afraid I don't even know what your enterprise is."

This confession seemed to cheer him up no end. He got up and walked round the room. The idea seemed to be that I should walk behind him, so I obliged.

"We are engaged," he said, "in ethnographical research. Speaking ethnographically, we stand here at the centre point of Europe. You follow the colour scheme." He pointed to the nearest map. "Dark blue is for the Germanic races. Light blue the Austro-Germans. Then we have the Magyars, the Slovenes, the Slovaks, and the Croats—each with its own subsidiary and mixed racial derivatives."

"I see," I said, untruthfully.

"You have made a study of these matters?"

"I know as much about ethnography as I know about making rice pudding."

"Ah. Then you'll excuse me asking this, I know. Why did Studd-Thompson want you to join us?"

"That," I said wearily, "is surely something that we can ask him when he comes back from wherever he has gone."

Lady's lips moved gently. I could see that he was repeating my last few words: *When he comes back from wherever he has gone.*

Then he said, "So you have no idea why he wanted you out here?"

"None at all."

"But you are very old friends?"

"Our friendship started a long time ago."

"And he had never mentioned what he was doing here?"

"Possibly he realized that I was not interested in ethnography."

Lady allowed himself something which, in a less tightly composed man, might have passed for a smile. A lifting of the upper lip. "That would be it, I expect," he said. "Now what are you going to do?"

"Wait for Colin."

"Here?"

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I controlled myself. " If you can't put me up," I said, " I have no doubt that I can find a room in one of the many hotels in Steinbrückl. It looked a nice, cheerful, gossipy sort of place."

" No," he said. " I am afraid I couldn't allow you to stay in Steinbrückl."

" How far away would you like me to go? "

" I think I should like you to go back to England."

" Well, think again." The trouble was, I realized, that I was losing my temper whilst he was not. The disadvantages of such a situation are obvious. I made the necessary effort.

" Let's be rational," I said. " I don't know what the set-up is here, but you can't turn me out of Steinbrückl. I have a perfect right to be here. If I start asking questions round Steinbrückl—"

The alarm was carefully concealed, but it was there. I had found a tender spot.

" On second thoughts," said Lady, " I think you had better stay here."

" I think that's one of the most gracious invitations I have ever received," I said. " I really can't refuse."

" Gheorge will allot you a room."

" That's all right," I said. " I've got a friend in the management."

Lady looked up sharply. " Who? "

" A lady I had the good fortune to meet during the war."

" Lisa? Yes? Where? "

" As I told you, I was a prisoner of war. I escaped from Germany into Poland. Then from Poland across Czechoslovakia into Hungary. I was a year in Hungary—some of it in prison. Then I got out, and was helped into Yugoslavia. Lisa was one of the people who helped me."

" Interesting," said Lady. " She would have been at a romantic age, of course."

" Of course," I agreed.

" You were friendly? "

" Oh, very friendly."

He just looked at me. It didn't matter to him. He wouldn't have minded if I'd murdered her old mother. It would have been a Factor; something to be discounted, or overcome, or perhaps just ignored.

" Then she will be a companion for you," he said, " until Studd-Thompson returns. You had better ask her to fix you up." As I turned to go he added, " There is one other thing. Here we are all of us guests. Our host is Baron Milo. We are free to do as we wish for the whole of the day, but he so far preserves the conventions of hospitality that he likes us to dine together at night. We meet at nine o'clock."

" I haven't got a dinner-jacket."

" Gheorge is your size. He will lend you one."

" All right," I said, and made my escape.

Lisa was waiting for me. " I have put your rucksack in your

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room," she said. "I will show you where it is. Is that all the clothes you have?"

"Every stitch," I said. "But I can soon buy some more."

"Have you got some money?"

"Lots of money."

"Good. There is a little man in Steinbrückl will make you some clothes. It will take about two days."

"I wish I could introduce him to my tailor," I said. "He has never made me the simplest garment in less than two months. What about lunch?"

"We had better have that in the town. No one here eats much until the evening. Lady has some sandwiches sometimes when he is working very hard."

"You ought to have warned me."

"Of what?"

"He's a poisonous little man."

Lisa looked at me, cold astonishment in her eyes. "But he is not poisonous," she said. "He is a great man."

"He couldn't be greater than he thinks he is."

"Philip, don't be so—" she cast round her diligently for the most wounding word in her vocabulary—"so insular. Just because he does not behave in a hearty manner and slap you on the shoulder and say, 'Old boy, old boy.'"

"If he had I should have assumed he was a confidence trickster."

"What's wrong with him, then?"

"Nothing really," I said. "He dresses like a shopwalker and uses scent and has got an ego the size of a balloon—apart from that he's all right."

For a moment Lisa looked as if she was going to be angry. Then she laughed. "Poor Phee-leep," she said. "You have always to be indignant about somebody. Yes? I remember. That is because you are a Martian."

"You still go in for that fiddle-faddle?"

"Because you do not understand it is no need to mock it."

We walked to Steinbrückl, wrangling peacefully. Lisa, like a lot of upper-class Hungarians, is a profound believer in astrology. She herself favoured the "onomantic" method, which was tied up with numerology and seemed to me to be even more haphazard than the "scientific" method.

"I suppose you've worked out Lady's horoscope?"

"But of course. He is a Jupiter. Loyalty, sincerity, and inherent greatness."

"That seems to me sufficient proof that your system wants overhauling. What was I?"

"I told you. You are a Martian. Combative and quarrelsome. Also you are under the influence of Pisces."

Before I could think of a suitable reply, we were entering the town. Viewed as we came down into it from above, it looked larger than I had thought at first. A sprawling hotchpotch of architecture. Streets of newer buildings sprung up, like a fresh

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undergrowth, under the white towers and gables of the old Austrian buildings. It had all the charm of a town built on a slope between a mountain and a river. Some of the streets were mere flights of cobbled steps. Its air of settled but agreeable melancholy was even more remarkable at close quarters.

"They live in dreams," agreed Lisa. "Like Brighton."

We had our lunch in a restaurant overlooking the river. After two of my attempts to talk about Colin had been deftly turned aside, I gave it up.

When we had finished our meal Lisa said, "I suppose now you will call on your representative."

"What representative?"

"Of your Government. I can show you his office. You will wish to report yourself?"

"Why should I report to anyone?" I said. "I'm in Steinbrückl as a tourist."

"We are rather far east for tourists," said Lisa. Her eyes had gone up as she spoke. From where we sat we could see the mountain edge, not very high, but sharp and defined, along which ran the last real barrier left in Europe.

"In any event," said Lisa, "if you do not go to see him he will hear of your arrival and will wonder. Major Piper is a very nice man. He will not eat you."

"I'm not afraid of him," I said. "If you think I ought to go, of course I will. Only, for various reasons, I think I'll not mention my real name."

"A new name. That's fun. What shall we christen you?"

I was devoid of inspiration.

"According to your natal sign, it should be Mr. Fish."

I drew the line at Fish. We compromised with Waters.

Major Piper had his office above a wine store. A faded board outside still showed the sailing ship which was the Corps Sign of the formation that had been in occupation in 1945. Below it, the letters "AMGOT" had been painted out and "H.M. Consular Agent" substituted: above it an arrow, pointing down the passage. At the end of the passage a second arrow pointed us up the stairs.

The office of the local representative of H.M. Government was in two parts. In the outer part, at a table, sat a lady. Her hair was blonde, her proportions were generous, and she was asleep. Even in her sleep she managed to preserve a certain calm dignity.

We paused, irresolute.

Fortunately at that moment the old-fashioned telephone on her desk rang. She woke up and went into action without any appreciable intermission. I have seen cats wake like that, but never human beings.

"Hullo. Mitzi here. Yes." Then to us: "Please sit down," and to the telephone, "He is very busy now, could you possibly make it later?"

The telephone sounded irritated.

"But certainly he is busy," said the girl. "Poor man, he was

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up all last night." Here the telephone evidently made an unkind suggestion. Mitzi said, "Certainly not. He was working," and rang off sharply.

"I'm sorry he's busy," said Lisa. "Perhaps we had better come back later."

"Only busy to that pig," said Mitzi. "I will tell him. What name?"

"This is Mr. Waters—an Englishman."

"I deduced it from his clothes," said Mitzi, and disappeared into the inner office. The partition was thin, and it was clear that she was now waking up Major Piper. Presently she beckoned us in.

The Major was a small, spare figure of a man. He could hardly, I thought, have been less than sixty. His flattened nose and broad, squashed face gave him the look of one of those peculiar Tasmanian mammals whose name I can never remember. His cheeks were rosy with interrupted sleep.

"Ah, hullo, Lisa," he said. "Nice to see you. And you, Waters. We don't see many tourists here. Not enough attractions, you know."

"I have rarely seen a town I liked so much at first sight," I said, and meant it.

"Not really. You mean that? Well, I must say, I'm fond of it myself. I've been here ten years. A bit sleepy, perhaps. It wasn't like that when I first came here. I was in AMGOT. Plenty of life then."

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"To tell you the truth," I said, "I hadn't realized that the eastern boundary of our zone ever ran so far beyond Völkermarkt."

"I don't believe it was meant to be here," admitted the Major. "Result of a mistake—like the rest of the British Empire. I'm told it was a second lieutenant in the 17/21st who couldn't read a map. No cavalryman ever can read a map. He was sent out to make contact with his Russian opposite number. Went to quite the wrong place, finished up here. Of course, things were very fluid just at that time, with the Russkis steam-rollering in from Hungary, and the Jugs coming up from the south, and the Eighth Army popping in from Italy three days ahead of schedule. Very off-putting for the politicians. Everything had to be decided on the spot in those days." He sighed wistfully.

"You must be almost the farthest east of any neutral territory," I said.

"That's it," he said. "An outpost." The idea seemed to please him. "Of course, the real chap who matters here is the Soviet trade counsellor. Name of Palantrev. You won't meet him. No one ever does. For years I didn't believe he existed, and then one evening I ran across him at a cocktail party. Funny little man. Small, fat, and frisky, like a biscuit-fed mouse."

"You say he's the real power," I said. "How's that? There aren't any Russian troops here."

"Not here," admitted the Major. "Not as far as I know. Plenty over the border, though. Line-of-communication troops they call them. They looked fairly operational to me the only time I saw them."

He looked at me sharply, as if I was the one who was being indiscreet. "Where are you staying, Mr. Waters?"

"He's staying with us," said Lisa. "We'll see he doesn't get into any trouble."

"An ethnographer, eh?"

"Mr. Waters is one of the leading experts on the correlation of Slavonic and Teutonic racial characteristics."

"Ah, that accounts for it," said the Major. "I thought I recognized his name when you mentioned it. I've no doubt I'll run across you both from time to time."

We took our leave. Mitzi was boiling a large saucepan of chocolate on a gas-ring in the outer office. She grinned at us.

"Might have offered us some," said Lisa. "It makes me slaver at the mouth just to look at it. Come to the Schlossgarten."

On the way to the Schlossgarten we dived down a close and up two flights of stairs to meet Lisa's tailor.

He was a nice old man, who worked in a small room which seemed smaller because of the number of children in it. During the process of being measured I counted eight, but there may well have been more.

I ordered a dinner-jacket, a suit for rough wear complete with knickerbockers—*le sporting*—and a sober suit of dark grey with a

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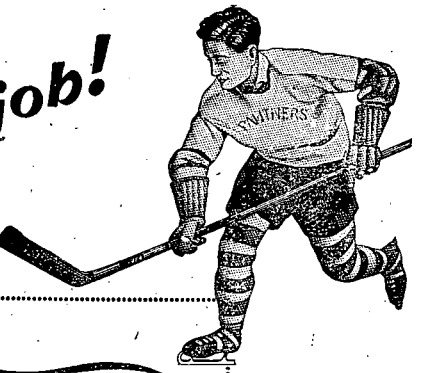

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generous roll to the lapels which is the uniform of all respectable continental racketeers.

Then we went to the Schlossgarten and drank our chocolate sitting under a striped umbrella with moth-holes in it.

As we sat there, the sun started to go down and a long shadow crept over the town from the west. The mountain line to the east was still warmed by the level sun, but the shadows were stealing up the lower slopes.

Lisa followed my eyes:

"It's just like a fairy story," I said. "Not the nice, pretty, Walt Disney sort, but an old German fairy story with woodcuts. Whilst the sun shines, girls and boys play. But when it starts to go down and the long shadows begin to creep, all wise children go indoors and pull up the drawbridge, and the creatures of the night come out and play till cock-crow. The little wicked creatures who live in the trunks of trees, and the night birds who talk to each other in whispers, and worst of all, the men with fox-faces. They look like men, and you can't be sure of them until they take off their shoes and stockings and you can see the hair between their toes."

Lisa said, "It is true. And in the morning, all the mountain line to the east is black and hard like the end of the known world. Then the sun comes up very slowly, and for a moment it turns everything red, like blood, before it comes flooding down into our valley, and life begins again."

She gave a little shiver. "I should have brought my coat. Come on, we will walk up the hill and warm our blood. Also, we must not be late for dinner."

Gheorge's dinner-jacket was a reasonable fit. He was longer in the arm than me but not quite so broad in the shoulder.

I walked into the drawing-room a few minutes before nine. There were five people already there. I identified without difficulty the Frau Baronin, a tightly corseted old lady with the face and bearing of Senior Treasury Counsel; she was deaf but apparently in possession of all her other faculties. The Baron Milo, a vital septuagenarian, was in front of the fire, with his son, General Milo, beside him.

I had heard of the General. He had started the war in command of a Panzer Division, but his reputation as an intellectual had diverted him from commanding troops and looking after districts to more confidential and, in the outcome, more harmless fields of work. He had steered clear with equal skill of the Assassination Plot and the War Crimes Trials, and if he had had an ounce of military ambition he could have had a top job in the new German Army. Colin had often spoken of him, and I looked at him with interest. He regarded me blandly in return through his heavy horn-rimmed spectacles.

Gheorge was talking earnestly to Lady, who had confirmed my worst suspicions by putting on a dinner-jacket with dark green velvet facings; and at that moment Lisa came in.

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"All here," announced the Baron. I could see him practically licking his lips. He jerked the bell beside the fireplace, and a servant, who had evidently been waiting on the mark, swept open the inner doors and we passed in an orderly rush into the dining-room, Lady leading with the Frau Baronin, followed by the Baron and Lisa, Gheorge and myself, with the General whipping-in.

Accounts of what other people eat are generally boring, so all I will say is that the food at this and every other meal I had at Schloss Obersteinbrückl was perfect beyond modern understanding. I am a parsimonious eater at the best of times, and the bulk and succession of the dishes was a little daunting, but nobody worried if you said no. There was always something else to follow. I could understand how Colin had put on weight.

Until the very end of the meal we drank nothing but Tokay. Gheorge, who sat on my left, said, "The Baron is a great lover of wine. He imports his Tokay himself from Hungary."

"And his girls from Yugoslavia," said Lisa, in what was meant for a confidential aside, but fell embarrassingly into a gap in the conversation. Gheorge frowned at her.

After dinner we took our brandy with us into the drawing-room, where a card-table had been set up.

"I am told you play bridge," said Lady.

"Why yes," I said. I may have sounded a little surprised.

"Before you came," explained Lady, "we were in a quandary. Three of us here are extremely fond of the game." He indicated the General and Gheorge, who were both smiling. Well, at last my usefulness was being appreciated.

The General spread the cards and we cut for partners. I found myself with Gheorge.

Bridge is a game that no one can really understand except its devotees, and they can live in it. Gheorge was a sound player of a painstaking sort. General Milo was a scientist, pure and simple. But Lady had a touch of genius. He was neither to have nor to hold. After two rubbers I thought I had pinned him down to one particular deceptive play, only to find to my cost, during the third, that he had planted the idea with motives of his own. It occurred to me to wonder, for an uneasy moment, what stakes we were playing for, but the two following rubbers redressed the balance.

The sixth rubber was long and very evenly contested. Finally the cards came down decisively in my favour, and sweeping aside the proffered sacrifices of the enemy, we rode through to six hearts and victory. I got to my feet feeling curiously stiff.

"Bedtime?" said the General, regretfully. I nodded and looked at my watch. I thought for a moment it must have stopped. It showed five o'clock.

Walking over, I drew open the heavy curtain. The window looked out over the tops of the trees. Mist and shadows filled the valley, but light had come back into the upper sky.

I have a faint recollection of staggering to my room where I pitched into sleep; sleep bedevilled by dreams of wolf-men and

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witches, with the faces of Lady and Lisa Prinz, who played cards for stakes beyond my understanding.

When I woke, it took me more than the usual two moments to remember where I was. My watch, which I had forgotten to wind, had stopped at half past five.

I climbed out of bed, padded across to the window, and pulled at the cord that operated the long heavily lined curtains. They slid back and I stood for a moment, held by the picture.

The mountains filled the eye; from the eastern side where they ran up low, kindly, covered in vineyard and olive grove, through a quarter circle to the wolf's fangs that stabbed the sky to the south.

The sun was so high that it could not have been short of midday. I dressed and ran down. The drawing-room and dining-room were empty. I walked through them into a smaller drawing-room and so out onto the broad stone balcony.

The Baron was perched on a wicker chair. He held in his hand a pair of field-glasses which he lowered from his eyes when he heard me coming.

"You are already up?"

"I thought I should be the last," I said.

"More probably the first. Except for myself and Herr Lady, no one rises here before afternoon. For myself it is no hardship to rise early. I have an interest in bird study." The only sign of life in the landscape was a group of young girls who were beating out washing on the stones of one of the mountain streams.

The Baron smiled. "Charming, are they not?" he said, and handed me the glasses, which were, as I had guessed by their looks, a most efficient pair of high magnification.

"Such shoulders and buttocks," said the Baron. "You would suppose them professional wrestlers. But interesting." I agreed that they were interesting.

"It is a lovely view from here." The Baron elevated his glasses from the washer-girls and swept the mountain circle. "We are within four miles of the Yugoslav frontier here, did you know? And six of the Hungarian."

"Well sited," I agreed. "From an ethnographical point of view." The Baron looked at me. The resemblance to the late Emperor Franz Josef was quite remarkable.

"Hungary," he said, "is a dull country, only redeemed by her wines. You appreciated the Tokay we drank yesterday?"

"Yes indeed."

"As Yugoslavia is by its girls. You noticed the one who served the Tokay?"

"I am afraid, Baron, that my mind was entirely on the wine."

"Then you must look at her tonight. Have you experience of Yugoslav girls?"

I was saved the necessity of answering by the arrival of Lisa. The Baron creaked to his feet and bowed. Lisa gave him a kiss behind the ear. "Would you care for coffee?" she said to me.

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There was nothing I could have cared for more. Lisa said, "Pull that bell and someone will come. The service here is old-fashioned, but it works eventually."

I jerked at a ten-yard strip of tapestry on the left of the fireplace, and a minute or two later the door opened and a girl came in.

"We should like coffee," I said in German.

"So should I," said the girl, in the same language.

At that I looked again, and felt myself blushing. She was young, with fair hair and a simple linen dress cut rather high across the throat. Lisa was laughing maliciously. "It is your jeune fille appearance," she said. "People all mistake you for the skivvy, do they not?"

The girl performed a demure little musical-comedy bob and said, "Is there anything I can do for monsieur?" this time in French.

"Excuse my appalling gaffe," I said, following her into the same language, which I speak clumsily, "and ask Lisa to introduce us."

"Truë Kethely," said Lisa. "This is Phee-leep. He has a surname too, but it is extremely English and I cannot pronounce it."

"Philippe," she said.

"Trude."

"Please, no. Truë. It is two syllables, but there is no d."

At this moment a lady with a grey moustache and beard came in with coffee, brioches, and, surprisingly, a plate of cold spiced sausage and gherkins. I can only suppose that this was for ornament. I never saw anyone touch it during my stay. When Lady arrived I even managed to greet him with a cheerful good morning. It was ignored.

He addressed himself to Truë. "*When* you are ready," he said, "I have some letters for you to type." He banged out as abruptly as he had come. Truë swallowed the remains of her coffee at a pace that brought tears to her eyes, and scuttled after him.

"If I spoke to my secretary like that," I said, "or, indeed, to any typist in my office, she would first throw her typewriter at me and then remove herself fast to an employer with manners."

"It would be a mistake," said Lisa seriously, "to judge us by English standards. Lady was born under the Twins. Like all Geminians he has two sides to his nature."

"So far as I'm concerned," I said, "he can keep them both."

"Also he is worried this morning. There is something—I do not understand it. A man was found in the river yesterday."

"A man?"

"A young man who worked in the Schneidermeister wine-shop. He was courting one of the servants here. He would sometimes be up here, after dark."

"Schneidermeister," I said. The radar gave back a very faint echo. It is a common German surname, but I had seen it recently. Then I got it. It was the wine merchant who occupied the ground-floor building where Major Piper had his office. I asked Lisa.

"That is right," she said. "Kurt Schneidermeister is the wine

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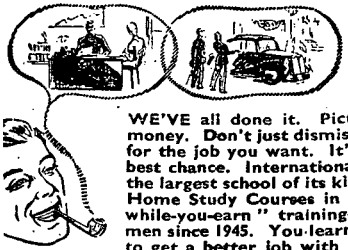

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merchant. He is a big man. Huge, I mean." She held her arms wide. "Like a tub. He is the most important wine merchant in this part of the country. The Baron knows him well."

"Yes," I said, disentangling it slowly as I went along. "But why should the fact that one of his men, who also happened to be courting one of the castle maids, is now found drowned in the river be a source of worry to our lord and master?"

"You must not sneer," said Lisa. "It upsets the balance of your face."

I gave it up.

"Besides, I have something to tell you about Colin."

"Something—?"

"No," said Lisa, "I have heard nothing. But I have remembered something. There was one man in Steinbrückl that Colin used to see more than any other. He is a German. His name is Messelen. He was, I think, in Rommel's Army in Africa."

"And why should this character know where Colin is, if you and the authorities do not?"

"I did not say that he would know where Colin is. But he could tell you about him, perhaps, that is all. And do not snap."

"I didn't mean to snap," I said, and gave her a brotherly squeeze. "I'll talk to the whole Afrika Korps if there's a chance it'll help. Where does he live?"

She gave me the address. I could see that she was upset about something. Probably the truth was that when Lady was in one of


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his difficult moods everyone in the castle reacted. Except the Baron. He was back bird-watching.

Number 40bis Marian-Kirchestrasse was a dilapidated, white-washed, many-shuttered, apartment house behind the church.

On the second floor there was a choice of doors. I knocked at two without success. Someone was whistling.

I knocked again, then pressed on the door, which swung open. The whistling stopped, and a voice said, in the gemütlich Bavarian dialect, " Who is it? Come in, anyway."

The first impression I got was that the room was full of sunlight. Both big windows at the back were wide open, and the sun streamed in, gleaming from the brass wire of five or six bird-cages. There was very little furniture in the room. A tiled stove, a few chairs, and a scrubbed wooden table. Behind the table sat a man of about forty. He had light hair cut very short, light eyes, a short nose that started in one direction and finished in another, and that sort of sand-blasted skin and general appearance of having been smoothed off on an emery-wheel which will be for ever associated with Rommel. " To what," he said, " does one owe what is commonly—but sometimes mistakenly—called the pleasure? "

" I'm sorry to intrude," I said, in my best German.

His face lit up. " Another Englishman! "

" Since you say another, there is a possibility that you knew a friend of mine. Herr Studd-Thompson."

" I know Mr. Thompson, yes. Mr. Colin—Studd—Thompson." He pronounced each word with relish. " A most friendly and agreeable character. A friend of yours, you say? "

" A very old friend. I have come here to find him."

" He has been lost then? "

" That is where I hoped you might be able to help me."

" Alas, no. I have not seen Mr. Thompson for—oh—more than three weeks."

" But I understand that you used to see quite a lot of him? "

" That is true, Mr.—? " I told him my name, but without much hope. He tried it in three different ways, then gave it up.

" Call me Philip," I said, " and tell me about Colin."

" Very well, Mr. Philip. Yes, I saw him often. We had interests we shared. I knew him well. Now, for instance, Colin . . ."

★ ***A busy solicitor, with an office in Lincoln's Inn (and a beautiful bowler hat!), Michael Gilbert lives in an old Rectory in Kent, with his delightful family of four small daughters. Born in 1912, his career was interrupted by the war, when he served in the H.A.C. and escaped from a prison camp in North Italy disguised in an Italian waiter's tail coat! Brilliant writer of detective stories "Close Quarters," "Fear to Tread," "Sky High," etc., his wartime experiences have borne fruit in this enthralling new book. The Second Part appears in next month's Argosy on sale April 10.***

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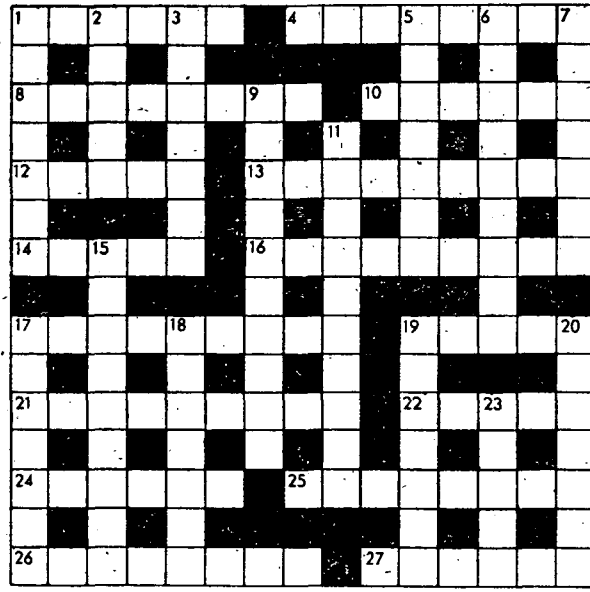
# ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 105

★



## CLUES

### Across

1 It's 150 amps—hold tight! (6).

4 Royal conveyance (8).

8 This might yield a draft or a draught (3, 5).

10 Glib after kissing the Blarney stone (3, 3).

12 Oil of reverses (5).

13 " She's Colour-Sergeant of the —— battalion " (Dickens) (9).

14 Do this to the roof and you're head of the house (5).

16 A quick move against opposition (9).

17 Street pal explodes with a bang (9).

19 Sporting cry to the conductor ? (5).

21 Cake for a slippery customer ? (4-5).

22 Be vulgar, perhaps? (2, 3).

24 Pussy has a quick one in the garden (6).

25 How killing! It's to let (8).

26 The final heat defeats him (6, 2).

27 You'll meet celebrities there tonight (2, 4).

### Down

1 One for a joke or a bargain (7).

2 "—— is the cruellest month " (T. S. Eliot) (5).

3 No attitude for an amateur (7).

5 Occupation conducive to longevity ? (7).

6 It may mean a peer's rent (9).

7 The lily maid's home town (7).

9 If you don't see it you can miss it (10).

11 It's hard to make out Con in there (10).

15 These gains indicate foul means (3-6).

17 Sit in it or swallow it (4-3).

18 Something for Dad's leisure hours, no doubt (7).

19 We wept by its waters (7).

20 Turn an honest penny by it ? (3, 4).

23 Put fifty on a boy's name, it's all in the game (5).

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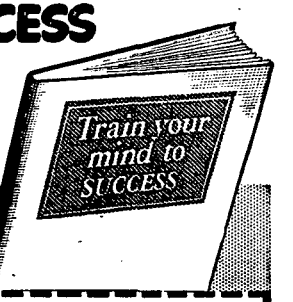


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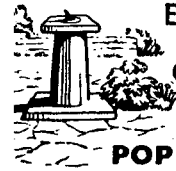

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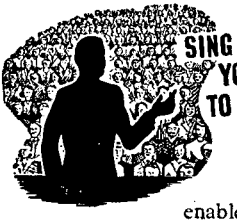

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**WOODS** who are paying[?]
£25 for it. . *Student* 778/211,
I thought it might interest y
to know that **THE COUNTR**
**MAN** has accepted a sho
article of mine on an
country custom . . . *Stud*
184/315: As you suggeste
I submitted the articles to t
**NEW STATESMAN.** One w
published on the 17th Ju
I have also had an artic
accepted by **MEN ONLY.**
*Student* 181/282: You may
interested to hear that I h
a letter from the Editor
**ARGOSY**; they offered
Twenty-five Guineas for
story . . . *Student* 591/28
You will be pleased that
article submitted for
Second Lesson was publish
in the **DAILY MIRROR** and
received Six Guineas for it.
*Student* 120/288: I ha
established contact with t
Editor of **PUNCH.** The ite
was accepted for "Charivari
and is a good start . . . *Stud*
1179/347: I succeeded
getting four Big Game stor
into **COURIER** and anoth
about "Shrove Tuesday
Another article appeared
the August issue of **BLAC**
**WOODS** . . . *Student* 1954/1
I have just corrected a pr
of my story for **WH**
**WORLD**: they have si
accepted another and I ha
sent in a third . . . *Stud*
171/162: I have sold my sto
to **EVERYWOMAN** for
guineas . . . *Student* 1106/15
The B.B.C. accepted the scri
for the *Light Programme*
fee 9 guineas—after my fi
lesson . . . *Student* 141/7
The article which I wrote
the Second Test paper
peared in the **SUNDA**
**MAIL.** Thanks for the reco
mendation.

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